Alexander Jablokov: Brain Raid

Fantasy & Science Fiction

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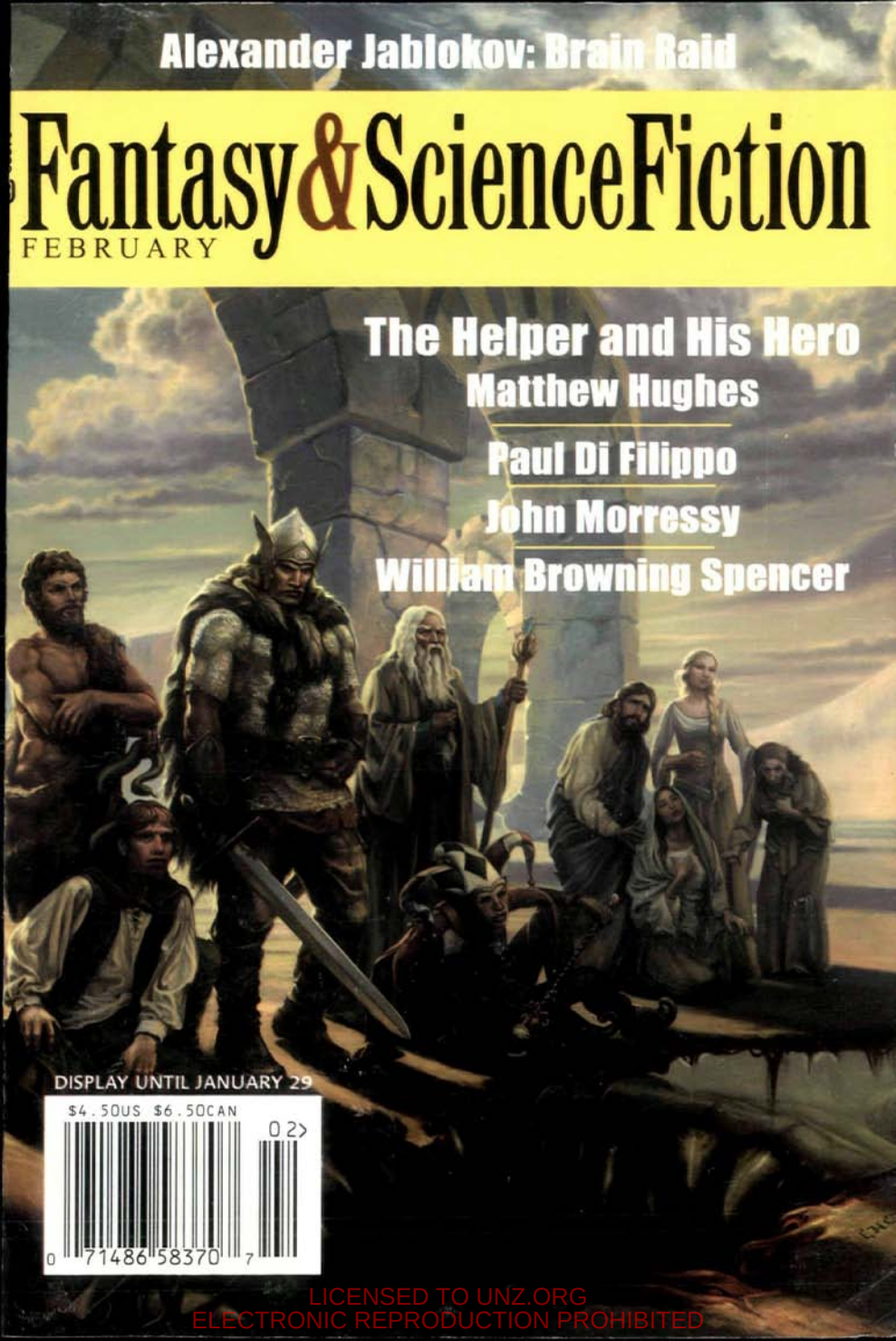

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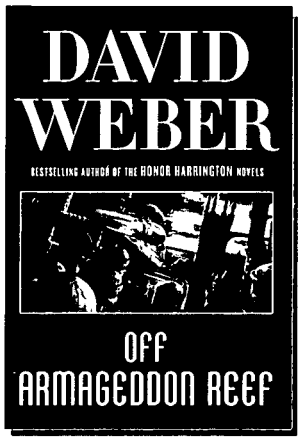

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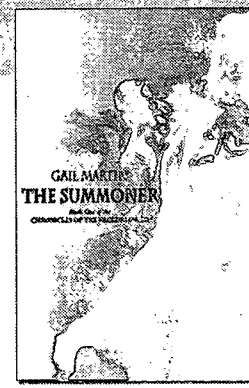

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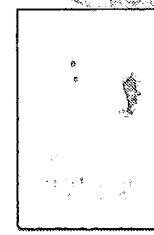

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Those of you who know Mr. Jablokov's fiction already will probably skip right past these notes, but since this story is his first one to appear in our pages, a few words of introduction are in order. Alexander Jablokov published five novels and about thirty short stories through the 1980s and 1990s, including A Deeper Sea, Nimbus *and* Carve the Sky. *Then he fell quiet for, a few years, perhaps because his two young sons took up the bulk of his creative energy, but now he's back at the word processor and we're happy to bring you some of the results. He notes that he's indebted to David Alexander Smith for helping contribute to the story's underpinnings.*

Brain Raid

By Alexander Jablokov

THAT MORNING'S JOB WAS a straight AI grab 'n go. We'd identified a rogue intelligence in a minimall on Route 222, near Ephrata, PA. A clerk at the Intelligence Regulatory Agency, in the Department of Labor, had assigned it the case name Donald.

Three of us from Gorson's Cognitive Repossession were going into the Limpopo home environment store anchoring the mall's right wing that day: Petra, Max, and me. I'd worked with Max a lot. Petra was new with us. She'd left a C-level outfit over in Philly to "broaden her background," which meant that she had been laid off. That probably accounted for her foul mood, even though she'd snagged a manager title, supervising us. Gorson's was licensed for D-level and below, quite a comedown for her. If you're used to Carries and Chucks, a Donald's barely worth getting up in the morning for.

But there she was, crisp and clean, sliding right for the service desk. My job was securing the staff and customers, then turning them over to the hired hospitality crew. Max's was locking down the loading dock

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behind the store, where a semi was loading decorative flora and fauna. Petra's was, redundantly, distraction and team management.

"Hot stuff, man." Max was more cheerful than I'd seen him in months. "We're scoring big. I can *feel* it."

"Cool it," I said. "Even at best, this AI's really just consumer-debt-reduction level. Keep that in mind. There's no big money here."

"Hey, not what you said the other night, eh?" He winked at me. "This is just the first step. Things are turning around for us."

Despite myself, I glanced over at Petra. "Enough tequila, and I'll say anything."

"Don't get all hot, man. I'm just looking to pay off that mortgage."

Max had a gigantic house, and an adjustable rate, from the days when Gorson really had been making money. That was before I came to work for them, naturally.

Max grinned and sauntered off toward the loading dock. He was fully loaded with a powerpack, focused explosives, circuit suppressers. It was way more gear than I'd ever seen him carry. He and Petra had had a discussion about it: lost and damaged equipment cratered the bottom line. And what had Max said? "You can't be too careful." Which didn't sound like our casual Max at all.

Damn me for shooting my mouth off that night. I'd brought this AI into our target list, but I shouldn't have told Max how much I had riding on it. There was still a lot that could go wrong.

"But how can these big trees live on my carpet?" Petra's voice came from somewhere behind glossy monstera leaves. Despite myself, I smiled. In just a few words you could tell she was the inane time-wasting client that was every salesman's nightmare, the kind you couldn't ignore, because sometimes they bought huge. "And why don't they fall through into the basement? I do have a basement. Did I tell you that?"

The clerk was soothing. "All the support gear is self-inserting and self-maintaining. It's no more than a foot thick, and takes over your subflooring. Structural stiffening is integral. Our installation team will do a full survey for your particular situation."

I swung through the store. Two middle-aged women stood near a lily pond, one with a frog on her hand, discussing lotus flowers. A gardener half-covered in butterflies stuck a pressure sensor into a thick vine. I had

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to sweep customers, but the Limpopo staff was my highest priority. The clerk talking to Petra was Sylvia, the gardener was Alphonse. My list had one more employee on duty that day, Maureen, sales and technical support, but there had been no way to predict the number of customers.

Where was I? Streams of hot light broke up the darkness. Steaming, rotting trunks loomed above me and gigantic leaves showered water as I brushed past. Glass walls loomed here and there, but the mulch paths always curved away before I reached one.

No Maureen anywhere. She should have been past those giant pitcher plants, their maws filled with writhing mosquitoes and bluebottles, but there was no sign of her in the mist. Why didn't those bugs die? I got distracted, watching their unending death throes. They must keep the poor damn things alive as a demo, maybe with tiny spiracle-nozzled aqualungs.

"But what about lights?" Petra was plaintive. "I mean, here you've got your growsuns. I'll have sunburn by the time I get back out to my car." Sylvia the clerk made a noise like she would do something about it — a sunsuit behind the desk? — but Petra was not to be pleased. "Oh, it's just sensitive skin. Despite my color. It's my burden, you know. Dermal distress syndrome. But all I have at home is a couple of floor lamps. Nice ones, you know. Ming vase things. At either end of the couch. So these big tree things will die."

"We take the lighting into account, of course. The best solution is for focused microlights to crawl the stems at night, after you're in bed, forcing solar energy directly into the leaf surfaces. By morning, they'll have pulled back into their storage modules. You can't even see them."

"Oh, that sounds dangerous." Petra was good. I had to give that to her. With all the floor clerk's mental energy going to keeping her patience, she wouldn't notice Max and me as we moved into position. "I don't want any fires."

"Not at all. It's a mature technology...."

I had a spider plant once. I guess you're supposed to water them.

Ah, and there was Maureen, my target, with a customer. A businessman in an inappropriate Central Asian duster, goggles dangling around his neck, examined an orchid held out to him by a cute red-haired woman in a coverall marked with green stains. Her big black gum boots emphasized

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her slender legs. A pair of yellow rubber gloves hung over the edge of a muck-filled bucket. The man reeked of frankincense, a dry scent that stuck out in that jungle, where everything else smelled like you'd squished it out between your toes.

"Hey," I said. "Which way to the club mosses?"

"Recreated genera are over there." Maureen was cute, but somehow pegged me instantly as an unprofitable customer. I didn't have Petra's skill at pretending to be a normal human being.

The church-smell guy had Maureen's full attention. But she had what looked like sucker marks on her pale skin. The climate had to breed all sorts of blood-sucking arthropods, and I tried to reassure myself that this meant she wasn't really so attractive after all. That's easier, when you're about to take someone into custody.

"Okay," Max's voice whispered in my ear. "I got the truck. Gave the driver a gift certificate to pick up some donuts, he's happy, and the detention mesh is up, so no one else is getting in. They do an incredible business here. This thing is packed with growing shit, man. And did you get a load of these prices? After this is down, I'm getting home to dig up some of those big spiky things I got growing down by the garage."

"Great," I said, then switched channels. "Could I have your attention please?" My amplified voice boomed through the jungle. "A cognitive enforcement operation is in progress. We have information about a rogue intelligence in the area. There is no danger. Repeat, you are in no danger. But security concerns require the detention of all citizens in the immediate area. Please relax and remain calm. We will have you on your way as soon as possible."

No one ever remained calm. The two women by the lily pond tried to scuttle out as if they'd just remembered an important engagement.

I stepped into their path. "Pardon me. Could you come this way, please?"

The shorter of the two, with huge dark sunglasses, barked, "Young man, I run a data-futures agency. An interruption could cost my clients billions. That's more important than whatever cheap paranoia you're peddling today."

"This is for your own protection." That particular lie must have been invented around the same time as fire.

"Listen — "

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"I'm afraid I must insist."

Her friend, a sweet-faced old woman with hair that glowed a radioactive blue and extremely nice breasts, took her arm. "We'd better do as he says, Maude."

Maude had to know that violent resistance could get her fined, or worse. We weren't allowed to manhandle detainees without good reason, but the definition of "good" got looser the more money there was involved. For your average citizen, getting caught in an AI sweep was just bad luck, like getting stuck in a traffic jam. If Maude was smart, she carried detention insurance.

"Can I see some ID?" Maude was stubborn.

I flipped it at her. She rolled her eyes. "Just my luck, caught by the JV squad."

People can be so cruel sometimes. The real money's in B- and C-level AIs, but that didn't mean Ds weren't as real a threat to the survival of the human race. "Come this way." I escorted them out and turned them over to the cheerful team we'd hired to manage our hostages.

"It's a pleasure to have you with us today!" a young woman in a pink smock said. "Would you like some guarana-jalapeño soda?"

"That stuff's toxic," Maude muttered as she pushed past her into the hospitality tent. "Get away from me."

I circled back. The bucket still stood in the clearing, the yellow gloves now floating in the murky water, but both Maureen and the guy in the duster were gone. I scanned for any hint that would make one direction better than another. There was subliminal movement all around me. All the leaves seemed to have tics.

A branch groaned as it rubbed against another. And a shift in the air brought me the scent of frankincense. If his scent generator had been flinging the molecules any harder I'd have heard tiny sonic booms. I moved toward him as quietly as I could.

A floor-length duster is a hell of an outfit for an interior forest. There he was. I could see him through a mesh of aerial roots. I'd thought he was creeping away, but instead he was fiddling with something. I got on my knees in the wet mud, scuttled forward, and grabbed him.

"Hey!" A yank on his coat and he fell face forward into the muck. "I've got an appointment, damn it! My business depends on it."

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No one ever yelled, "I was going to spend the day relaxing!" People just didn't seem to give that sort of thing enough weight.

He rolled and looked up at me. "She slid off into the trees. Smooth and quiet. She wasn't running, but it was clear she had an escape hole somewhere."

"Where did — " He'd given me Maureen's whereabouts so far ahead of my question about her that I had started to ask it anyway.

"You might have time to get her, if you move fast."

"Thanks for the advice. What's that in your pocket?"

"This? It's, ah, an orchid. For my mom's birthday. That's today." He pulled the purple flower out of his shirt pocket and examined it. "Seems okay. She gave me a whole bunch of instructions on how to set up the pocket ecology for it, let it grow into your clothing...."

"Put it down."

"What?"

"Put the orchid down and don't pick anything else up. You haven't paid for it, so you'll have to wait." I stood relaxed, waiting for him. If he tried anything, I was ready.

"Oh, come on." He seemed near tears. "I was late already. I'm always late. I pick up these things at the last minute.... I'm a bad son."

"I'm not here to deal with your family issues."

He sucked air through his nostrils, looked at me, and realized that his mother would have to wait a bit longer for her corsage. He set it gently on some moss.

"Just my luck, grabbed by a bunch of benchwarming D-levels. Have you already checked out every programmable toaster in eastern Pennsylvania?"

I smiled at him. "You can tell us how to serve you better on the appropriate form. Plenty of them available in the lounge."

The hospitality lady was a shade less cheerful this time. "Would you like some coffee?"

"Eat me." Duster swept past her. She looked like she was going to cry. I doubted we'd get this team to work with us again, which was fine, because I didn't think we'd be able to pay them anyway.

Back into the jungle. "Max. Has anyone headed back past you?"

"No, man. All quiet here. You lose someone?"

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"I haven't lost anyone."

But something about this situation was bugging me. I ran over to the bucket and pulled out the gloves. I turned each one inside out, but they looked like regular rubber fabric. The bucket seemed to contain only muddy water. I dumped it out and poked through it. Nothing in there but a half-rotted leaf she'd probably plucked to keep the plants looking nice. The bucket itself was a single piece of vinyl. I kicked it away.

Seismic analysis had indicated a significant cavern beneath the store's floor. That was presumably where our target AI, Donald, was hiding out. Was there some kind of secret access to it from the sales floor?

"Taibo," Petra said in my ear. "Where are you? You should have everyone sequestered by now."

"One to go," I said. "Just a second."

"It was nice work, picking this one up," she said. "Let's just wrap it up and go."

"I'm on it. Really."

"Hey, man," Max said. "Don't get caught up in the details. Be a big picture guy and move on up. Get this right, and everyone will forget all about Bala Cynwyd, you'll see."

"Thanks for the career advice."

"Hey, no problem."

Max and I had gone out for drinks one night the previous week, not too long after I'd gotten the lead on the Limpopo AI. I'd been feeling good...and maybe a bit vulnerable too. I'd gotten the lead from an old bud, Chet. Chet and I worked together, years before, at a beltway bandit tech consulting firm in Falls Church. Since then, I'd knocked around through half a dozen careers, while he'd gotten in on AI hunting early, and now was a partner in a B-level firm, Beagle & Charlevoix, that dominated the mid-Atlantic market. He'd given me a call a few weeks ago, just to catch up on things, and we'd caught dinner at a Cambodian restaurant in Lancaster. Southeast Asian thinkingpins were rumored to be behind a lot of recent AI activity, and the cuisine had become popular among those who hunted AIs. Maybe they thought the spices would give them an insight into their quarry. Chet particularly favored tamarind, pouring it over things that did not require it. And he had given me a lead on the Limpopo AI, as a memory of old times. Maybe he felt sorry for me, I don't know. This particular AI

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was something his employers regarded as too small-time to mess with.

But to Max I'd made it sound like I made the AI on my own, just from the clues.

Something was going on. I picked up the wet leaf, and an image came to me: sucker marks on Maureen's temples and cheekbones. I looked more closely at the leaf. The veins looked natural, but they were just a surface decoration. Its actual structure was a complex mesh.

Jesus. An aicon.

We were in over our heads. Aicons were datalinks from an AI to people who had decided to associate with it. We tend to call them "acolytes," partially to demean them and make it seem like they are devotees of a carved wooden idol, rather than colleagues of something that disposes of more processing power than the entire world in 2010.

AIs with aicons are not D-level AIs. They are not Donalds or Dorises. They're not even Craigs or Cindys. They are Brittanys and Boones. If that was the case, we were in real trouble. Not only does Gorson's Cog Repo only have a D-level license, it has a D bond that's pushing its face into the floor. Taking on an AI, an intelligent device physically invested in a populated space, is dangerous. Even D-level bonds are millions of dollars. C- and B- level bonds are gigantic funds, with lots of corporate shareholders who hate uncompensated risk and hire expensive lawyers to protect their investments. Taking on a high-level AI with an inadequate bond was like jumping out of an airplane holding a paper umbrella from a Mai Tai. We'd have to cancel the clean, now. Maybe we could grab a finder's fee, which could run five percent or so of eventual recovery.

But why would there be a B-level in a plant store? I was overreacting. The leaf was...I didn't know what it was.

No way I'd go crying to Petra about it. I'd played clever detective with her too, making like documentary research and pavement pounding had scored this AI. I wasn't ready to drop her respect down to zero again.

So I went off station and ducked into the drier air of the lobby that occupied the central part of the overgrown strip mall.

Down on ground level was a cutesy barewear store with lines of breasts, alternating perky and heavy, hanging in the display window, with a markdown bin of last year's abs outside the door, and in front of that a few pushcarts with fringed canopies selling scented candles, decorative

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contact lenses...and cute toys for kids. I'd caught a glimpse of a baby's mobile, schematic faces with big eyes and heavy eyebrows dangling from it. Children react to human faces before anything else, and infants will stare fixedly at one. Someone had clearly interpreted "stare fixedly at" as "enjoy": the beginning of a lifelong misunderstanding.

Competing restaurant logos flickered on the glass balconies above, and dripped down red and green. The scent of galangal and cilantro implied sinister Cambodian thinkingpins plotting the replacement of western civilization by a rack of cognitive servers. The gleaming cylinders of fish tanks penetrated the floor to their support gear somewhere in the cellar. A grainy red dot from a laser spotter marked out a fish a diner had chosen for lunch. A net dropped through the water and scooped it out, flopping.

A waiter in a short jacket pushed a cart stacked with covered dishes.

"Hey!" someone shouted from overhead.

The waiter stopped.

"Extra tamarind!" The staffer overhead tossed down a squeeze bottle, which the waiter caught deftly. "Special order."

I'd been well and truly gamed — I knew it right then. I watched the waiter trot the cart out into the parking lot and disappear, presumably toward an air-conditioned bus with a well-equipped wet bar. Those B-level guys liked to hunt in style.

I didn't see the entire plan, not yet, but I knew there had to be one. It was looking more and more like there was an unexpected B-level AI somewhere in that jungle, and that was what Chet and his crew were licensed for. Which meant that it wasn't unexpected to Chet. But if he'd known it was a perfect target for his crew, why hadn't he just gone in to get it? Why involve me and my sad sack colleagues from Gorson's Cog Repo? There had to be a reason.

Then I remembered what I had come out here for. I bought a mobile from the pushcart vendor. I grabbed a face with a black pageboy and red lips and held it up to the leaf I suspected of being an aicon. Maybe I had jumped to conclusions a bit too quickly and had imagined the whole thing.... The leaf vibrated. I saw a flicker of lights in what suddenly seemed depths within its folds.

The leaf writhed and tried to grab on to the face. It was so sudden I almost dropped it. Some kind of skin adhesive along the leaf's edge stuck

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onto my right pinkie. I shook it, disgusted, terrified, but it stuck fast, as if it had become part of my finger. It took an effort of will for me to calm down. It stopped moving after a few seconds, and a few more before it decided autumn had finally come, and dropped off my finger. I shoved the face in my pocket.

THE BALA CYNWYD AI had really been an Ernie. It had gotten upgraded to Denise after Gorson himself had lobbied the IRA with processing metrics someone in the examiner's office had found persuasive. "Denise" was pretty much an overgrown home media center hacked up by a neglectful but too-smart parent. No one likes these suburban domestic grabs, but they're bread and butter cases.

Maybe we got overconfident. Max and I went in as screen installers and managed to slide a real media center in to replace the AI, so none of the kids in the house even noticed. They often get attached to entertainment devices that were smarter than they were. It made choosing channels so much easier.

But as we were turning out of the cul de sac, a repair van backed out of a driveway and, ignoring our car's frantic envelope-violation signals, smashed right into us. Nothing disabling, but even saving human civilization won't keep you from serious trouble if you leave the scene of an accident. There was a lot of paperwork, and then we found that our fender had been pushed into our front tire, making our minivan undrivable.

As Max and I tried desperately to pull it back out, a couple of cars pulled up and blocked the street. Teenagers spilled out of them. Some quick action with a 3D printer had given them giant styrofoam turbaned heads with the weary and wise face of their aiconic image. Seemed like this AI had a thing for early twenty-first-century Islamopop preachers. Not real aicons, thank goodness, and they had the merciful side effect of muffling those slogan-chanting voices — but if any of those kids suffocated, it would be our fault. Jesus!

There was Max, wrestling with one of them. What the hell? He was supposed to be in the back of the van, disabling the AI's comm links, not mixing it up. There were half a dozen minicams out already — a lot of people didn't get out of bed without turning on a video recorder. We were

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popping up as windows on the screens of every easily distracted cognitive activist in the country. Most of them had nothing but time on their hands, and could hop into their augmented walkers and camel-strut on over here, to pile more workstation flab around us.

By this time, small remote-control blimps circled above, denouncing us and our attempts to drive the human race back to a pre-post-industrial economy, disempower ethnic variants, and prohibit refraction-correcting eye surgery.

There was only one thing to do now. I yanked Max off his victim and shook him. "Run!" I said.

"Wha — ?" He looked around, as if seeing the yelling mob around us for the first time.

"Come on!"

We sprinted. No one had expected us to abandon our AI so quickly, and it took them a couple of seconds to react. I jumped over a car hood, leaving dents in the soft metal. Two guys managed to grab Max, but he shrugged out of his flight jacket, leaving them with nothing but fleece and leather.

We'd lost the AI. We were alive, we were free, but we were without income for the month. Like any bounty organization, Gorson's worked on a Paleolithic reimbursement schedule: mammoth-stuffed, or starving. Petra, our brand-new boss, wasn't happy to feel her belly rubbing up against her spine quite so soon.

"Oh, man." Max shook his head at his own stupidity. "Don't know what came over me. Little weasel. Couldn't stand seeing his overpriviliged protesting butt out there while I'm working to save him from the futility of his own existence, you know what I'm saying?"

"Yeah, buddy. I do."

"Man, I loved that jacket. This sucks."

"Yeah. It does."

It wasn't too long after that that Chet took me out to Tonle Sap and, while stuffing his face with oversauced pork, had slipped me the location of a so-far unidentified AI that wasn't worth his company's while to go after.

Maureen dropped from a tree onto me as I reentered Limpopo. She might have been able to take me out right then and there, but she

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miscalculated. An angled branch deflected the force of her attack and I was just knocked to the side. I rolled off the soft undergrowth and came to my feet to pursue.

She'd already recovered. I caught a flash of flared nostrils and staring eyes. "You luddite terrorists can try to stop us, but you will fail!" Her kick caught me in the solar plexus and threw me back into the undergrowth. "You're just a taxicab for a DNA helix, you stupid meat processor!"

She had the singularity-sucking rhetoric down so well she could spout it while showing off her aikido moves. That was fine. She was confirming a few things for me. My job now was to stay conscious long enough to do something useful with my conclusions.

No time for pride. She'd be on me in a second.

I tore at the nonlethal restraints on my equipment vest. Stickum, slippem, oopsy, barfem: stuff named by preschoolers, and that did things preschoolers would have found amusing. This gal moved like a martial arts expert, so I figured a vestibular disruptor like oopsy was the best choice. Extremely coordinated people have always pissed me off anyway. I flicked the galvanic grenade at her and ducked.

She took another kick at me, but spun around and fell with a desperate wail as her vestibular system sensed random tilts and accelerations.

Now, where the hell was she?

She was only a few feet away — I could hear her crawling through the underbrush — but no matter which way I turned, huge elephant's-ear leaves were in my way. They pressed in, thick, fleshy, damp.

I felt one unfurl against my cheek. I scrunched my face up like a baby refusing a spoonful of mashed peas. Like that was going to do any good. I unsquinted one eye. The leaf was covered with hairs, each three inches long. No. Not hairs. Needles, incredibly thin needles.

"I have trouble," I said. Petra said something in my ear, but I couldn't understand it.

Then I remembered the face. I reached down along my side, almost dislocating my shoulder. There. I could feel it in my pocket. I got two fingers in, almost dropped it, and managed to pull it out.

Everything had gone silent. The leaves formed a globe around my head, shutting out all sound and light. It should have been dark, but the surface of the leaf flickered. And now I could hear a sound, like the

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whispering of distant voices. They were saying something immensely important, something I absolutely had to hear...I jammed my elbow back, and got the face from the child's mobile up.

Human beings sample, and use cheesy makeshift heuristics, because we just don't have any brain capacity. If we tried to deal with the universe full on, our craniums would explode. AIs are different. They dispose of orders of magnitude more processing power, so they can see, hear, and know everything.

That's the theory, but shortcuts appeal, no matter how smart you are. If there's something more valuable to use your processing on, you'll do it. It's comparative advantage. Some thoughts are just more worth having. So, if these aicons were something the acolytes put on to communicate with their AIs, the mechanism wouldn't necessarily run a full analysis every time. I'd guessed the leaf responded to simple facial features like eyes, nose, eyebrows, mouth, and, like a child, like anyone, responded more strongly to the high signal-to-noise-ratio fake than the noisy, self-contradictory, and contingent real.

It clamped on the face and, for an instant, the rest of the leaves relaxed. I dropped and twisted, then elbow-crawled through the underbrush, following the trail of broken stems left by the redhead. Behind me, leaves rustled as they missed further confirming data, and failed to find cranial nerves, or chakras, or acupuncture meridians, or whatever it was they were looking for.

She was on the ground, minimizing the need for balance. And the disruption was temporary. She'd be on her feet in less than a minute. I crawled toward her and got a hand on her foot.

"Please comply," I managed to groan. "This is just a routine security operation. No ideological purification required...."

She twisted away and kicked me in the head. Fortunately her gum boots softened the hit. I sucked muck but didn't lose my grip. I crawled forward onto her.

"You don't understand." Maureen was near tears. "You're going to break the Gardener down into processing units and use her to...manage an oil refinery, or something."

"Hey, it's relaxing work. I hear it's kind of like being a bartender. Surprisingly high job satisfaction ratings, when you look at the numbers — "

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"The Gardener is an artist, not a piece of iron-age industrial control apparatus! You're not getting her. She's staying free."

A few inches farther and I could restrain her — a thick vine slipped off the tree that had been holding it up and fell across my shoulders. The damn thing was heavier than it looked. I tried to shrug it off, but it pushed down harder. By the time I realized what it was up to it had braced itself against some huge roots on one side and an irrigation pipe on the other, and pinned me to the ground. I dug my hips into the dirt and tried to squeeze out under it. Its pressure increased.

I tore holes in the soft soil, but didn't move an inch. I was having trouble breathing. Maureen slipped out of my grasp and disappeared...back up the tree, it seemed.

I didn't care about that anymore. I was really feeling the lack of oxygen by this point. My vision was contracting, and I could no longer see anything out to the sides.

What had led me to this miserable situation? It might just have been the oxygen deprivation, but as I gasped for breath, I remembered something.

After our dinner, Chet had slapped me on the shoulder and said. "Hey, Taibo, if you ever run into any trouble, be sure to call me. I value your contribution, you know that. Whatever happens, it will be worth your while."

It hadn't made any sense when I thought about it, but it had been perfectly fine as part of the flow of flattery and moral support that Chet had been offering me. He'd told me that I could still make some money, if less than I had hoped, by calling him and his team in. Great guy, Chet. I hoped I'd live to thank him.

"Hey, man, what you doing on the floor?" Max stood over me, vaguely puzzled.

I tried to talk, but now there really was nothing in my lungs. I tried to point.

"What, this fall on you?" He yanked at it, grunted when it wouldn't move. "You get yourself in another mess, man? Sheesh. Petra's scrubbing the mission. You hear that? Whole thing's a big botch. I can't use any of my gear now. I could lose my license, you know that? Man. I need it. Car needs a new transmission, and there's a frickin' colony of squirrels in my

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kitchen exhaust fan. I try to chop 'em up with the blades, but they just dance around 'em. Gotta get pest control in there. Those guys cost."

So that was it. The last thing I would ever hear would be Max bitching about his household budget.

"Just a second, man." He stepped away, then reappeared, holding a shovel. He jammed it under the root and levered. The pressure on my chest lessened enough for me to catch a breath, but not enough for me to get out. He grunted and dropped his weight on the handle. I was able to scrabble out just before the handle snapped and the vine fell back down.

I rolled onto my back. "What's going on, Max?" I asked, as soon as I got my breath back.

"Ah, a big screwup. Not your fault man, you just got bad information. Happens. Happens to everyone."

"Gee, thanks for being so understanding."

My angry tone startled him. "Hey, man, I just rescued you. What are you getting so pissy about?"

"You knew this thing was a B-level AI when we came in here."

"What? No, man, I — "

I grabbed his shirt. "I shot my mouth off about getting a tip from my buddy Chet. And you knew it was a setup. Right away you knew he wasn't about to be giving me anything valuable without getting something in return."

"Well, man, you guys do have this dysfunctional relationship. I don't know why you hang with him."

I hung with him because he always bought dinner and because he managed to imply that he thought I was too smart to still be stuck with a one-bedroom apartment near an all-night convenience store and grad-school furniture with beer-can rings on top of the bookcases, without actually ever promising to give me any help in moving up. The information about this clean was the first real thing he'd ever given me.

"That's why you were carrying all that gear," I said. "You thought you'd take on a B-level AI with a couple of satchel charges and an electromagnetic pulse grenade? Are you crazy?"

He had the grace to look shamefaced. "That damn adjustable-rate mortgage is eating me alive. I bought at the top of the market...so I'm an

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idiot. But, yeah, I wasn't sure what was going on, but I knew there was money in it."

"But I still don't get it," I said. "Why did Chet give me that information in the first place? What does he get out of it?"

"I can tell you that," Petra said above us.

Both Max and I jerked. I sat up, trying to squeegee some of the mud off my clothes with my hands, and he put what was left of the shovel aside, as if it was a weapon that violated regulations.

She sat down on a fallen mahogany log. She was my boss, and as a result I didn't particularly like her, but right now she looked young and bony, and as much in the crap as Max and I were.

"Do you think we're the only ones with money problems?" she said.

"Hell, things are tough all over," Max said. "We know that. So what's their game here? Why was Chet setting up poor Taibo?"

Great. That's the identity I'd been looking for: "Poor Taibo."

"Because they're up against it too! They come off smooth, confident, world-beating...believe me, I know. I smelled it, up there. Beagle & Charlevoix. Great parties, champagne on ice in your hotel room, all that stuff. What was not to like about that? After all, we had a trade secret. Someone in Research had figured out how to turn aicons into one-way trackers. You could detect the AI, while it had no data flow back. Worked great in a couple of major cases. The AIs never knew they were being bugged by their own aicons.

"But now...there are too many teams — trained teams, full of cog sci Ph.D.s, anthropologists, former Omega Black assault troops — chasing too few AIs and pushing margins down. Beagle & Charlevoix has monstrous overhead. Big capital investments in equipment, lots of salaried staff, nice downtown offices with wood paneling and marble desktops. They're just as hungry as we are. Hungrier, 'cause their body is bigger. And they're not meeting their bonding numbers. No one knows that yet, but they couldn't credibly bid on a class B assault. They've been doing Cs recently. Colleen over in Lehigh, and Cornelius way off in Wheeling. They didn't publicize it. Full dress operations, using full staff, just to keep everyone busy — I doubt they made much back, if anything."

Petra had burned out at the company. Personality conflicts, I'd heard. That didn't surprise me.

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"But, like anyone else, if they're called in on a job that's going wrong, the bonding requirement is lifted, and the reinsurance is picked up by the Labor Department. So you, my friend, were set up." She pushed hair off her forehead. "And there's nothing we can do about it. Chet probably encouraged you to call him — "

"If anything went wrong," I completed. "Yes. I have his card in my pocket."

"Very nice of him to offer," she said. "I think you should punch him up."

"No way! No way!" Max was furious. "We can take this one, man. We got it on the run already. You're ready, ain't you, girl? Ready to blow the floor. I've got the gear. It's hot pursuit. Two can play that 'got the cognitive level' game. We got the proper documentation, right? A good-faith Donald. But it's trying to get away. Escape! If we grab it while it's trying to get away, we're totally legit. Oh, maybe a couple of fines here and there, but nothing that will cut too far into our profits. We'll just let our accountants figure out what line of which schedule those expenses go on."

"Max!" Petra was too depressed to even spark up at being called "girl." "This isn't a joke. This thing's too big for us to grab. Even these guys, with a full team, will have trouble."

The thought was bitter. I could just see Chet and his crew rolling out of their wagons and swaggering into the store, the tails of their expensive black coats flapping as they collected the goods....

"Hey," I said. "I don't think I'll have to call Chet at all. They have an agent in here, swept up. He switched out of uniform, but seems to like the feel of the duster around his ankles. I should have guessed it just from that. He's been watching us. He knows the whole story."

Now that I thought about it, it was obvious. When I'd grabbed him, Duster had given me completely false information about where Maureen had headed. That wasn't too suspicious in itself. People sometimes saw AI acolytes as some kind of oppressed ethnic group and tried to protect them. And he'd slid around a little on whether he had to get to work, or get a birthday present to his mother. But the clincher was the way he'd gotten all nasty about our D-level license.

Except I hadn't had a chance to show him my license. He'd known the whole situation without seeing it.

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"Who?" Petra demanded. "Who is it?"

I described Duster to her.

Her face flushed. "I can't believe it! I know who that is. We never got along, at B&C. Arrogant little.... Bastards! They had this whole thing set up. How far back? Maybe since I left."

She and Max were both still excited, but I was ready to go home, take a hot shower, and go to bed, despite the fact that it wasn't even noon yet.

"Man, we are screwed." Max shook his head.

I'd switched careers quite a few times in my life. Each time, it put me at the bottom of the hierarchy, behind people who, dumber or smarter, had had the sense to pick something and work their way up in it. And now I was here, go-to guy in a second-rate AI hunting troupe, tied to a charming hysteric and a depressive control freak. It was the most fun I'd ever had, the first time I'd ever felt that I made a useful contribution.

So, I guessed it was time to make one. A thought had been nibbling at me since I realized who Duster had to be. He had no idea I had figured it out. None of them did. As far as Chet and his gang were concerned, we were all still the patsies he'd set us up to be.

"Petra," I said. "It's my fault. I got that information from — "

"Never mind whose fault it is. Do you have anything to offer but your guilt?"

So she was back to being hard-ass manager. That was fine. I did have something to give her. If it was still there....

I searched down the path toward where I had first encountered Duster. And there, vivid on the emerald of the moss, lay the orchid he had tried so hard to take off with.

"I have an aicon." Sure enough, if you looked carefully, which I hadn't before, you could see the delicate circuitry embedded in the petals. "It's linked into the AI its acolytes call 'The Gardener.' And one of those acolytes, Maureen Nikolaides, is still on the loose. I think we should leave her that way."

"Okay." Petra crossed her arms. "I like an employee who can turn a performance problem to some advantage. What are we going to do with her?"

"We're going to let her escape. Along with her AI."

* * *

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"Good news, folks!" I'd worked hard on the tone: a chipper front over defeat and failure. "You're free to go. Just a small debrief, and we can have you out of here. Again, I apologize for the inconvenience."

They looked up at me. Most of them had been sitting around a folding table that was littered with half-eaten bagels, orange juice cartons, and mini jelly containers. Phones, screens, and other communication devices had been inactivated. That usually, after a long pause, resulted in something like a party. People often made friends in those few hours, and Gorson Cog Repo even had two marriages to its credit. None of us had been invited to either wedding.

The data-futures lady, Maude, got up and bustled out past me, followed by her blue-haired friend. She gave a farewell wave to the shirtless plant maintainer, Alphonse, whose thick chest hair was now frosted with powdered sugar. He smiled vaguely, as if he'd already forgotten who she was.

Duster sat by himself, erect in a chair, like a Japanese warlord waiting for a report from a samurai. He raised his eyebrows when he saw me. If I was right about him, he'd need to move now. If we completely disengaged from our pursuit, there would be no legal way for his team to take it over.

"What happened?" he said. "What's going on?"

"I genuinely apologize, sir," I said. "We were in error. There is no AI present here."

"No...what are you talking about?"

"Oh, that's internal business, I'm afraid. Our information was imperfect. Here's your phone."

He shoved it into a pocket, then remembered his cover story. "My mom...I'll need to go back and get that orchid. If you've cleared out...."

"Five minutes," I said. "Five minutes, and we will have officially declared this area AI-free — "

That was too much for him. He stood up. "Jesus. You guys can't even handle a simple...let me out right now. Maybe there's still something to be salvaged from the situation."

Gone was the businessman obsessed with getting his old mom a flower. This was a well-paid, professional, class-B AI hunter. One, I reminded myself, who was just as much at risk of losing his job as I was.

I had to play it carefully. I frowned, trying to look confused but not

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completely befuddled. "You're a hunter, too? You should have mentioned it. I had a nice cherry Danish I was saving, I could have let you — "

"Let me out of here! There *is* an AI under there. If you pull back, you'll lose it completely."

"Thanks for helping out, but there's nothing under the floor. The cavern's completely empty. Just a bunch of pots and stuff down there. Fertilizer bags. We thought it was weird, that it was so big, but maybe they're planning to expand."

He stared at me, stunned. The subterranean space was clearly where most of the processing power was. A week or so before, Petra had driven a public works truck around the mall, seemingly examining pavement, but really sending seismic mini-shocks through the ground, outlining the nonconducting empty space that hung under the plant store like a giant egg. Our theory was that they had hidden the excavation waste as substrate in their various jobs. The rock and dirt from under the mall now resided in living rooms all over southeastern Pennsylvania.

"You've got the perimeter completely tight?" he said.

"We did. Sewer pipes, mall access, everything. Nothing in or out." I smiled with pride at our thoroughness.

"Ah, you *did*?"

"Well, we can't very well sequester the whole mall now, can we? Business has to go on. The place has deliveries to make. They lose a shipment, we've got penalties to pay. Some of that stuff's perishable."

"Shipment?" His rising tone was so outraged that it almost made me break character by laughing. "Where? Show me!"

"I think all those plants are paid for already, but sure. Sure. Come on."

We ran through the plants. I now knew where the path to the rear led, so I was able to get lost convincingly.

After a bit of confusion, during which I thought he would try to strangle me, we got straightened out and found the loading dock at the rear of the store. The truck full of plants was just pulling out of the alley. Max had had some trouble pulling the driver out of the donut shop where he'd relaxed, but he was now on his way to make his deliveries, just a bit late.

"Damn it!" Duster ran down the access alley, long coat flying, as he yelled into his phone. "Get a team down to the 202 onramp. We've got a good possibility of a live escape! What? Yes, I'm sure! Hurry!"

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It wouldn't take them more than a few minutes to discover that the thing was full of nothing but plants. And they were professional enough not to pull everyone off surveillance here at the store. But their surveillance would be light for just a bit. I moved.

I'd thought about how Maureen had arrived and disappeared. There didn't seem to be any access at ground level....

I wasn't as limber as she was, but I was still a primate. I grabbed a branch and clambered up. The trunk seemed solid, at least on this side. I swung around. My feet slipped out from under me, and I ended up dangling, ten feet or so in the air. That would look just perfect, when Chet, Duster, and the rest of the B-squad came sauntering in to take care of things.

I worked up some momentum and managed to get a toehold on the rough bark. That gave me just enough support to walk hand over hand to the next branch, then lift a foot and get, at last, solid support.

And there it was: on this side, the trunk just ended, with a ring of branches around it. A dark hole descended, with a convenient maintenance ladder on one side.

"I'm going down," I said. "Wish me luck."

No one did.

MAUREEN AND I spotted each other at the same instant. Instead of running, she charged straight at me. And as she did, I caught a glimpse of what she held in her hand. She was packing...I guess I wouldn't call it "heat," but close enough: a neuromuscular junction suppressor, sort of a remote-control curare-by-RF. Worked on a human the same way that a HERF gun worked on electronics: AI's Revenge. The thing made no noise at all. I might have stood there with my mouth open, and then collapsed without closing it, if she hadn't, again, acted a bit too soon. The Gardener might be up to B-level, but its staff still required some training. My whole left arm was numb. Jesus! I ran, stumbling and off balance, my arm dangling like a length of Italian sausage.

The Gardener's secret hideout was a vaulted space about twenty feet high that had been carved out of the earth beneath the minimall. Dirt had been heat sintered into a crude support shell, lumpy and sagging, with

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concrete squirted in here and there, seemingly at random. Clearly work done without a permit.

A few dim lights showed roots that dangled through the ceiling into masses of perfusion tubes. There, in the center of a tangle of infomycelia, was what had to be what Maureen and her fellow plantsmen called the Gardener: a few complicated shapes that might, at one time, have been irrigation and growth hormone controllers, now grown into a self-aware entity.

I dodged behind it. It was the only possible thing I could do.

It wasn't enough.

"Stop," Maureen said.

A hummingbird that had somehow made it down into the cellar buzzed through the air, zigzagging in its search for a blossom.

"Don't kill the poor bird," I said.

"What?" Her finger was on the trigger, but she didn't pull it yet.

"You may think I'm guilty of something, but that bird hasn't done anything. Let it...." It floated away. "Okay." I scrunched my eyes shut.

"What are you talking about, mister? This thing is nonlethal. Just a little relaxation for you — "

"Sure. If you have a sharp crash cart team ready to intubate and a ventilator warmed up. The diaphragm nerve connections go too, just as with curare. My breathing will stop. I shouldn't tell you, but, lucky for you, an autopsy won't show anything. Unless someone decides to do a neurotransmitter assay and discovers that there's just too little acetylcholine in the postsynaptic receptors. I think you can bluff your way past that one. Not that it will matter much to me, one way or another."

She looked at me. I tried to act as if I were staring death in the face. Where the hell was Petra with Max's explosives?

She shrugged. "I won't tell the Gardener, then. She's kind of sentimental."

She squeezed the trigger just as the ceiling fell in on us.

Max's explosives had done a lot of damage. I heard cracking and shifting as the poorly engineered structure started to collapse over our heads. A tree, its roots loose, leaned over with a creak, and toppled. Soil showered after it, then a sizable chunk of concrete, which hit with a

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hollow thud. Solid columns of light rose around us. Concrete dust clogged my sinuses. I couldn't see where Maureen had gone. I didn't want her hurt. That wasn't the point of this particular exercise.

I crawled through what looked like a combination plant nursery and machine shop, damaged by the cascade of rubble from above. An overturned sprouting tray dripped hydroponic fluid. Grow lights dangled over a project: a veined flower, like a crocus, with its petals floating free, supported by lines of translucent, glowing threads that marked out some complex function, soon to be concealed. A hedge of elaborate manipulator arms labored delicately over it, pulling lines through, connecting others, like a sewing bee. Several aicon leaves floated in sealed plastic bags on an old potting table.

The Gardener's original purpose had been to create biocircuits, hyperflow xylem, physiological sensors that allowed flower scents to reflect or lead the moods of the people in the room with them. So now it created aicons for its dirty-fingernailed followers. I patted the orchid in my pocket. It was still linked in, but the Gardener had no idea that it still existed. As far as it was concerned, Duster's orchid had vanished.

Someone groaned. I dug through the rubble, pulled off several stalks of bamboo, and found Maureen, bruised but still alive.

And conscious. "Get away from me."

"I'd like nothing better. But you're the one who's going to have to get away. With your little gardening gadget, if you please."

"What are you — ?"

"Max!" I yelled. "Over here."

Max deftly backed up two trailers with low railings, pushing them with an electric tractor. He'd duct-taped a big yellow flashlight to it as a crude headlight. It shone forward, away from us, into the darkness of the escape tunnel that the acolytes had dug over long months, between the humming aquarium bases for the fish tanks that stretched up into the restaurants on the top floor. I could see the gleam of fish as they reached the bottom and turned to go back up.

"Don't run over her!" I waved frantically and he came to a halt a few inches short of Maureen's outstretched fingers.

Max peered down at her. "She good for this? Or should I grab another of these Druoids?"

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"She's good. Just give her a couple of minutes. The roof just fell in on her."

"Hmph." Max was carefully unimpressed. We went to work on the Gardener, in full view of Maureen, who seemed unable, or unwilling, to understand what was going on.

I whacked at power interlocks. They were standard safety-release, but had been wrapped in resistant tape, then encased in resin. I figured that it would definitely be a problem to lobotomize your AI by tripping over a data cord, but this rose to the level of paranoia. Max and I sawed through, released the connections, pulled off the power.

Together, we levered the bulk of the Gardener into the carts, along with a decent selection of interface devices.

"You got that connection gadget?" Max said.

I glanced at Maureen, but she was checking over the Gardener, making sure it was all right. "The aicon? Yes."

"Give it to me. I'll take care of it."

"You'll — "

"Just give it. You'll see."

Sometimes Max knew what he was doing. I handed it to him and he shoved it into a pocket.

"Is it ready to get out of here?" Petra asked from the darkness.

"Just a couple of minutes and she's ready to roll," Max said.

Maureen looked up from her AI. "What's this about?"

"Us helping you to escape, you mean?" I grinned at her. She remained expressionless. "It's kind of complicated...."

"We want your AI," Petra said. "We can't have it. Legal problems. But I'll be damned if I let those bozos upstairs get it either. If you rip out of here in the next two minutes, sister, you'll have it free. Otherwise, you're a bounty for our competition. I really wouldn't want to see that. Do you?"

The silence stretched. By this point Duster would have realized that the truck was a distraction, and would be back with the rest of his team to cut off all routes of escape. As I thought about that, I found myself irritated with Maureen for not taking this obvious opportunity. In a real sense, it didn't matter if we were lying or not. If she didn't do something, her AI was done for.

"Ah, screw it." Max flipped a switch and the tractor motor hummed

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back to life. "She's too dumb. I'm taking this out. Ten percent finder's fee is better than nothing. Better than sitting around down here trying to slap some sense into an AI-worshipping interior decorator."

"Wait!" Maureen turned to me. "Is this true? You're letting me go?"

That was quite unnecessary. What made her trust me all of a sudden? "Yes. But not because we want to."

"I wouldn't have it any other way." She hopped on the tractor and hummed off into the dark tunnel.

"Okay," Petra said. "Have we really just let that thing go?"

"Nah," Max said. "Me and Taibo, we're all set. Now, let's see what the smoothies do when they show up."

"I have to say, Taibo, that was a nice try with the truck." Chet smiled at me. "Anton's pissed, though. I'd suggest staying out of his way when he finally turns up."

Chet's team had arrived. Guys in long coats had spilled out of sedans with dark-tinted windows and smoothly closed off the mall. There seemed to be dozens of them, each with a stack of gear, a support vehicle, and a separate online channel of coverage. I was no doubt showing up on thirty different feeds right now, edited in different ways, with various explanatory text crawls on my chest. I tried to look iconically like the Losing Team. It was surprisingly easy.

"Anton" had turned out to be Duster's real name. He had chased that truck for much longer than we'd anticipated. Max's hopped-up spiel to the driver had persuaded him to expect desperate plant hijackers, and he had led Duster and his team a merry chase along various Amish-cart-blocked roads down toward Lancaster. Duster, I gathered, had gotten a bit out of hand at the seizure, and been arrested by some local cops. The fact that the truck had come up completely clean of any AI activity would not do him any good at any hearing. Chet's team would have to finish their job here before anyone could try to get him out of the Upper Leacock lockup.

"What are you going to do?" I asked in bewilderment. "Why are you here?"

"We've got to take this over, Taibo." He managed to sound sad and reluctant, as if it had really not been something he wanted to do. "This has gotten completely out of hand. I had hoped you would be able to

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handle...well, it's all water under the bridge now, isn't it? Some things look really easy when others do them, but then turn out to take a great deal of skill. Just remember that, next time."

It took every ounce of my willpower to keep from punching him. That was nothing you wanted to do while on two dozen channels of net coverage. People would be critiquing my form — "too much arm, not enough body" — before I was even under arrest.

"So...I still don't understand. Are you helping us out?"

"No," he said. "We're not helping you out. We're formally taking over this operation. All of it. It's the only way, Taibo. I'm sure you understand it."

There. He'd finally gotten it out formally, though I was sure he'd also filed the necessary permissions. Along with the AI, he'd just taken on all the liabilities associated with the operation. Whatever happened, all the property damage was now entirely Chet's problem.

"This is a really dangerous AI, Chet." I got all goggle-eyed and paranoid. "You have no idea — "

He smiled and patted my shoulder. "Come on, Taibo. Let's go in, and you can see how the big boys do it."

PETRA RAISED THE LID. "Who had the pork and coconut?"

"Me." Max shoveled most of the bowl onto his rice and started eating. Petra looked at me and shrugged. We'd all earned a decent meal.

"Shrimp and baby corn. You on a diet, Taibo?" She knew I usually went for pork.

"It's going to be a long haul, Petra. I don't want to weigh myself down."

She shrugged. "Suit yourself."

The aromas of curry, fish sauce, and galangal mingled in the air.

It had been an uncomfortable scene. Chet's crew had torn the place apart. No Gardener. No aicons. Nothing. Just a huge hole in the floor and some astronomical liability. They'd found Petra in the barewear shop trying on some delts she didn't need, and hauled Max out of his hidey hole behind a fish tank. The exposed orchid aicon had been the biggest risk.

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Max hadn't yet said anything about what might have happened to it, and Chet had spent a lot of time looking for it, based on the description Duster had phoned in from his holding cell.

Chet had spent some time telling me what an idiot he thought I was, how he had played me the whole way, how I had never had a clue. In the end, he had managed to imply that I'd somehow taken advantage of his generosity to an old and unsuccessful friend in order to betray him. I'd invited him to join us for lunch.

As it happened, he had other plans.

Petra glanced at Max, who still had his face buried in his food. "Okay, Max. Come up for air and tell us where the aicon is."

Max looked up, vaguely irritated, and, instead of answering Petra's question, signaled a waiter. "Hey! Where's the extra?" He then grinned at us. "I ordered another dish for us. From the fish tank. Stuff like that's always best when it's fresh."

"From the — stop screwing around, Max."

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"You gave me the assignment...ah, here we go."

The waiter pushed up a cart. Max grinned at him and took the covered tray from it.

Petra stared at it. "How — "

"Can't show it yet. Taibo's buds are still staring at us. The orchid's in a doggie bag. We can haul it out with our lefties. I shoved it through the basement maintenance hatch of the fish tank with an almost-neutral floater. It's an old drug smuggling trick. Thing looks just like some bit of kelp or something. Floated right up past these guys while they were charging around."

"Well, Max." Petra sat back. "Very enterprising." She looked at me. "You don't look too happy about it, Taibo."

I had been moving my food around, but not eating it. "I — I don't actually like shrimp that much."

"Hey, man, you scared that Maureen won't like you when you come after her supersmart gardening machine?" Max laughed, spilling rice down his chin. "You got a steady job. She'll forgive you."

I didn't look at him. He was my buddy, but sometimes he really annoyed me.

"That really was good work, Taibo." Petra sat back in her chair. "We have a link back to the AI. Beagle & Charlevoix have been forced to assume all the liability for this job, by formally taking it over. It'll bankrupt them, guaranteed." If I hadn't known her dedication to AI hunting, I would have thought that the most pleasing aspect of the job was the damage it would do to her former employer. "But shorn of aicons, with its processing reduced for transport, this Brenda or whatever it is will still look like the Donald we originally thought it was." She glanced at me, looked away. "Maureen's looking for support from the acolyte underground, but it will be a few days before she manages to find it."

Neither Max nor Petra understood my position. I'd been mediocre in various positions in the past. But now I had a job I was good at. It was in a declining industry, natch, but you can't have everything. The next step, in addition to being good at it, was to be successful at it.

"Let's grab our leftovers," I said. "Who's driving?"

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Eyes of Crow, by Jeri Smith-Ready, Luna Books, 2006, $14.95.

I'VE SAID IT before: I like trying books by new writers. With a debut novel, you never know what you're going to get. It might be gold, or it might all turn to mud and twigs and leaves after only a few pages. You go into the story with no expectations, because this is a new voice, a fresh take, and let's face it, new territories are what we're looking for when we open a book.

Eyes of Crow is an absolutely delightful coming-of-age story, set in a world where the industrial age has yet to arrive. Our third-person viewpoint character is a young woman named Rhia, and the people of her agricultural-based tribe have a close connection with personal animal spirit guides. It has nothing to do with faith. They have an actual relationship with their guides and can often utilize certain of their animal attributes.

Rhia's known forever that her spirit guide is Crow, but she has avoided accepting it because in this culture, those rare people connected to Crow are the ones who can foresee death, and guide the spirits of the dead from this world into the next. It's an important task, though not a particularly cheerful one.

But her avoidance has a cost when she is unable to help her own mother's passage from this world. Heavy with guilt, Rhia finally accepts her burden and goes to a nearby hunter/gatherer forest tribe to begin her training.

Everything is different among the forest people, including the fact that for a person connected to Crow to carry out her functions for the tribe properly, she first has to die.

There's an abundance of riches in this book, and Smith-Ready handles them all so well. The cultures and customs are well thought out and rendered, the connections

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with the spirit guides are wonderfully magical and filled with Mystery, and the complicated relationships of the tribes people are handled with a realistic flare.

There is a war brewing (isn't there always in a fantasy novel?), but Smith-Ready focuses on the people as much as the mustering and movement of armies, which gives the readers a strong emotional connection to every element of the book, be it a complicated relationship between a couple of characters or a battle scene.

And best of all, while this is the first book of a trilogy, the reader is left completely satisfied at the conclusion of this book, while still wanting to read the next volume.

Thunderbird Falls, by C. E. Murphy, Luna Books, 2006, $14.95.

We were first introduced to C. E. Murphy's half-Irish, half-Cherokee protagonist Joanne Walker in *Urban Shaman*, in which the Seattle-based police mechanic discovers a connection with, and a responsibility to, her magical abilities. Through the course of the story, she gained a sidekick (cab driver Gary), became a little more familiar with her abilities (while trying to deny that they exist), and saved the world from the Wild Hunt.

In *Thunderbird Falls*, she's now a policeman on foot patrol, though she still lives mostly in denial of her abilities. (A note to the author: that was interesting in the first book, but it's getting just a little old now; please don't keep this as an element of her personality in the next story, because if Walker still can't accept what she is after all she's gone through by the end of this book, she's too dumb to keep our respect.)

Reluctantly, Walker finds a spirit teacher to train her in these abilities she's not one-hundred percent sure she has, and it pretty much goes downhill from there—in terms of Walker's problems, that is, not Murphy's ability to tell a story.

Walker's first-person voice is charming, with just the right touch of self-deprecating humor, and immediately draws the reader in. The magical elements are personal and a nice blend of pragmatic and spiritual. And Murphy keeps us on track (and on the edge of our seat) throughout, no matter how convoluted the plot eventually gets.

As I said about *Urban Shaman*, this isn't a Big Think book, but it's thoroughly entertaining from start to finish, and in a time when too many books have a tired, same-old,

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same-old feel to them, that's reason enough to pick up one of Murphy's books and give her a try.

The Beast of Noor, by Janet Lee Carey, Atheneum, 2006, $16.95.

At the length of belaboring a point I've made in this column before, I'd like to return for a moment to the late sixties/early seventies. If a fantasy fan from those days was to see the vast cornucopia of material available to us here in the first part of the twenty-first century, they'd think they'd died and gone to heaven. (Mind you, the cultural shock in terms of technological advancement might be enough to give them a heart attack, but I digress.)

At that earlier point in time, when I first began to read fantasy, you had to work to find the sort of book we take for granted now. We had the Unicorn imprint from Ballantine under the editorship of Lin Carter; Dover books with their reprints of classic books by Leslie Barringer, Robert W. Chambers, and others that had fallen into public domain; and the odd offering from other publishers that was usually hidden in their sf line. With so little material readily available, readers would scour used book stores for the grail of titles by the likes of Lord Dunsany and William Morris. Or we'd plunder the mainstream sections of the book stores for reprints by, say, Thorne Smith.

Or we'd look to the children's book section. (I might be wrong, but I think the term Young Adult was still to come — just as was the idea of a dedicated fantasy genre.)

One of the best sources for quality material in those days was Atheneum — the imprint that brought us such luminaries as Susan Cooper and Patricia McKillip, the latter still offering up perfect fantasy jewels at least once a year, albeit from

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a different publisher now. I have many fond memories of those early Atheneum titles, curled up in a reading chair late at night, letting the words take me away into the magical otherworlds to be found in their pages.

So it was with great delight that I found *The Beast of Noor* to be upholding that fine tradition.

Janet Lee Carey's new book has that same timeless quality of the best of fantasy. There's not a lot of exposition. Instead, we're immediately plunged into the island world of Hanna Ferrell and her brother Miles, finding out about the island community and the wide world beyond its shores only when necessary, and in passing. What's surprising is that her earlier three books have contemporary settings. Where did she get the authorial chops to write such a resonant fantasy novel, individual, but still touching on all the tropes that draw readers to this sort of a book?

It doesn't really matter. All we need to do is crack open the cover and slip into the story.

Hanna and Miles are outsiders. Their family is related to the Sheens, an island family that, long before the book begins, was responsible for bringing into being the Shriker, a giant murderous dog that lures its victims into the untamed forest.

Gone for some time, the Shriker has returned, and a young girl from the village is the beast's latest victim. Her death firms Miles's resolve to make right the errors of his ancestors — a determination that only grows stronger when he realizes Hanna has begun to have the dreams that will have her sleepwalk into the forest where the Shriker will be waiting for her.

As usual, I don't like to go into a lot of plot details — how a story unfolds should be the reader's pleasure. But let me assure you that Carey is a generous and lyrical author. She doesn't waste words, but the immediacy of her prose carries in it the brevity of good poetry, and a contemporary flair. *The Beast of Noor* reads like a fairy tale — but a sustained, substantial one, with plenty of solid characterization and the sort of magical moments that will have your heart sing in one moment then shiver in the next.

Is it a Young Adult novel? Yes, if you still consider McKillip's books to be YA.

Will an adult fantasy reader enjoy it? Without question.

Highly recommended.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P. O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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Musing on Books

Michelle West

Wintersmith, by Terry Pratchett, HarperCollins, 2006, $16.99.

The Fourth Bear, by Jasper Fforde, Viking Penguin, 2006, $24.95.

The Privilege of the Sword, by Ellen Kushner, Bantam Spectra, 2006, $14.

TERRY Prachett gets me every time.

I approach each of his novels as if it were, in and of itself, a trusted friend, which is why I often save them for times when you need one — like, at four A.M. when your real friends might justifiably consider homicide if you phoned them. But as with all good friendships, the dialogue never moves just one way; you put something into the reading, and it marks you; you take it away with you and it sits inside your head. Well, mine at any rate.

In his third venture into the world of young witch-in-the-making Tiffany Aching, he opens with the end, and then starts at the beginning. This gives you the added pleasure of rereading the beginning later on.

Tiffany Aching is a witch of the Chalk, the land of her people, a village in the middle of nowhere that's never had much use for witches, and wouldn't hold with having one if Tiffany weren't the daughter of Granny Aching, the old woman of the hills who kept the hills safe.

Her ties to the land are stronger than those of any other witch that she knows, and stronger than she herself has ever fully realized, and her ties to the seasons are strong because of it. She accidentally happens to blunder into the dark silence of the Other Morris Dance because, well, her feet just pick up the beat, and anyway, Morris Dances are for dancing.

But in Pratchett's universe, the Other Morris Dance is danced in the darkest of Winter nights, and

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the bells are utterly silent. It is not a festive dance. It *is*, however, a dance that is not meant for Tiffany Aching, nor any other young girl.

Joining it was not well thought out on her part. Any other young girl might be forgiven this, but Tiffany is a witch of the Disc, and all her actions have consequences. In this case, it's an adolescent boy crush. Unfortunately, the adolescent boy is the embodiment of Winter, and he's set his sights on Tiffany. And Tiffany is not entirely unhappy about it to start with — because really, the life of a witch is all about *not* using magic, about *not* doing things the easy way; it's work and drudgery, and this is a little... cool.

Unfortunately, it gets very *cold*, and if Tiffany — who has her hands full with a new village witch who needs a lot of help, but is almost too proud to ask for it, and certainly too proud in general — can't somehow bring out the end of the natural story of the seasons themselves, Winter will never end.

I have an artificial divide in my own mind between poetry and prose. Poetry is meant to evoke in people the familiarity of something that's already been experienced — the *aha* that you feel when someone has described, in an exact way, something that you've experienced yourself and recognize. Prose is meant to take people on the entire narrative journey; the story evokes emotion because you've traveled the road.

There are moments in this novel in which Pratchett is a poet; you can see the way he observes people, can feel what he doesn't squeeze into the words. When Tiffany's father says "I haven't mentioned this to your mother yet" in his very quiet, calm voice — it cuts. I don't know if the young adults at whom this book is ostensibly aimed will even understand how much pain the man is in and how he masks it, how much of a nightmare it is to ask your only daughter to *risk her life* to do what you can't do and would literally give your life to achieve. But there it is, in Chapter One: and it's so understated. It made me cry.

The nac mac feegle always make me laugh; the observations about people and the frailty of their very silly hopes and the strength of their even sillier superstitions make me laugh. The idea that the Wintersmith might try to become human is open for comic possibility — but also the poignancy of dreams that *cannot* be realized. And the core definition of what makes a

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man (or human being)...I think it's at the heart of the way Pratchett handles his universe, and that's why the Disc, in all its larger than life characters, is like a second home to me now; a place I return to time and again, a place I never tire of. It's not for the new and the dazzlingly original that I crave Pratchett — it's for the humanity of his humor, the sharp and yet at the same time gentle sting of his observations. He sees people clearly as they are, foibles and nastiness notwithstanding, and he *still* cares for them.

After the end of *Hat Full of Sky*, I was sure Pratchett was taking Granny Weatherwax and Tiffany in a certain direction — and after this book, I'm not so sure. And I'm happy to wait for him to surprise me. But I'm not waiting patiently.

Jasper Fforde hit the ground running with his stories of Thursday Next, a detective in an alternate universe in which literary crimes (fake Samuel Clemens counterfeits, for example) *are* crimes. He then turned his hand to Jack Spratt and Mary Mary of the NCD — the Nursery Crimes Division. It's called the Nursery Crimes Division because in the universe of Jack Spratt, fairy tale characters are flesh and blood, and living among us. It takes a special kind of person to deal with the three bad wolves, talking eggs, ambulatory and intelligent pieces of cutlery — and Jack Spratt privately thinks that in this case, special equals not-quite-sane.

This is not the first time this conceit has been tried — the comic book series, *Fables*, deals with pretty much the same idea — but Fforde, of course, is vastly less serious. For one, his Nursery characters don't generally pretend to be mundane, and don't have to.

If his first book poked fun at the importance of good publicity, and the non-academic version of publish-or-perish, his second takes a few digs at the self-importance of the literary auteurs while along the way covering the Car that Dorian Gray Sold, the serial killing Gingerbread Man, and Goldilocks and the three bears. Well, sort of three; the title implies more.

The Gingerbread Man is in theory the responsibility of the NCD — but the glory of solving the Humpty Dumpty murder in the previous Spratt novel, *The Big Over Easy*, has faded, as all things do, and the ignominy of failing to save Red Riding Hood and her Grandmother, added to the questionable use of children as bait for the Scissor-Man who cuts off the thumbs of children

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who suck them, has once again landed Jack and the NCD at the top of the PR heap, and *not* in a good way.

Also, the small stress of the Red Riding Hood case has caused Spratt's immediate supervisor, Briggs, to suspend him pending the results of an independent psychiatric assessment, which a very harried Jack Spratt doesn't have time for. A new addition to NCD — a literal alien — and a new pet in the Spratt household add a few complications, but really, Jack barely notices them. He's got a probable murder on his hands, a definite murderer on the loose — one he's not actually allowed to pursue — and also the illegal distribution of porridge to bears, who are walking, talking NCD cases if ever there were one. Fforde is crazy; he's all over the place. He's aware of the conventions he's mocking, he mocks them openly, and he still has a really decent romp of a mystery novel on his hands.

Ellen Kushner's new novel — after too long an absence — is not the intentionally humorous work that either Prachett or Fforde offer. A direct sequel to the excellent *Swordspoint*, it's set many years later, when Richard St. Viers has left the Duke Tremontaine, and the city in which they made a name and a life for themselves by the simple expedient of not dying. Well, and by killing people who wanted to change that state.

Alec Campion has an estranged sister who is not doing well financially, and he ushers his niece, Katherine, into High Society in Riverside as the price for bailing his sister out of her debts. Katherine has been brought up well; she knows how to be the almost perfect country girl of good breeding. Nothing in her life has prepared her for life with Alec Campion, the Duke Tremontaine, a man who is known far and wide for his vices — and not, to her shock, without good reason.

Alec sends Katherine out to a summer house, where she meets a man who will train her in the art of swordplay, something she has no interest in at all. But the man — quiet, almost humble — is so passionate about the one thing he knows well that, in the isolation of a summer house, she is drawn into his world. She takes up the sword and learns to use it because there's not a lot else to do.

Unhappy to be parted from her swordmaster (especially as the method of her departure is almost a

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kidnapping), she is not prepared to wake in the vast halls of the Riverside manor the Duke Tremontaine calls home. Completely off her stride, she meets the young man who acts as valet and personal attendent to the Duke, one Marcus by name. And she tries more or less to land on her feet in the games that society plays — games which are not necessarily safer than the sword she's been learning to wield.

But the feet on which she lands aren't the delicate and daintily shoed feet of a Duke's niece — for the amusement of her cynical uncle, she's kitted out as a swordsman, and as a swordsman, she begins to meet society.

Because she's still a young lady of import to the Duke Tremontaine — who is, among other things, quite rich enough to survive his vices (his multiple lovers, and his odd household) — she meets various people, and one of these is the primping but perfect young lady, Artemisia, a girl with fashion sense and the honed romantic instincts of someone who is meant to make her future by marriage.

And because of events surrounding the naïve Artemisia, Katherine's natural sense of honor and outrage cause her to challenge a man with money, power, and the ability to destroy the lives of those around him. Life begins to unfold in a perilous sequence of events that will require Katherine to *be* the swordsman she's dressed as.

There is wit enough in this book to cut yourself on, and Alec Campion is no angel; he's a rather self-indulgent man who is bitterly, bitterly attached to the love of his life, and can't have him. Were it not for the household he has built for himself — the Ugly Girl, whose gifts are entirely intellectual, the damaged Marcus, the Black Rose — I would have desired greatly to kick his butt across the nearest river and tell him to stop feeling so damn sorry for himself. But even in the fog of self-pity that his life has mostly become, he sees some things clearly, and he guides his niece toward a coming-of-age that is both unique for her time and place, and utterly rewarding for the reader.

There's a lot in this book about the lives of women in a society that treats women as either chattel or, well, chattel, really — but Kushner never sermonizes; it's there, it's a fact of a life, and it's part and parcel of the narrative drive. It might give some people something to think about if they're not so engrossed in the what-happens-next that makes this book such a delight.

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Bill Spencer is the author of Resume with Monsters, Zod Wallop, *and* Irrational Fears, *but around here, readers seem to remember him best for his story about a would-be nature writer and the animals he finds, "The Essayist in the Wilderness" (from our May 2002 issue and recently reprinted in his collection,* The Ocean and All Its Devices*). Originally from the Washington, D.C., environs, Mr. Spencer lived in Austin, Texas, for many years. Recently he and his wife relocated to a town in Lafayette County, Missouri, where strangers on the street ask him, "So, how's the novel coming along?" The novel, entitled* My Sister Natalie, *is nearing completion.*

His new story was written in honor of the 2006 centennial anniversary of Robert E. Howard's birth. He adds that, unlike the hero of this story, he has always been fascinated by the works of Marcel Proust. (Okay, Proust and Howard—you've been warned.)

Stone and the Librarian

By William Browning Spencer

"Civilization is unnatural. It is a whim of circumstance. And barbarism must always ultimately triumph." — Robert E. Howard

I
In Africa, Again

HE WAS A CHILD OF SEVEN years when the Librarian's men came for him and carried him from the small village where his father labored in the mines.

They came in the afternoon, with his father away. His mother fought for him, fought until the Librarian's soldier slew her with a single stroke of his broad axe so that all the child took with him from that day was the image of his mother sprawled on the ground, her garments in disarray, one arm flung out, fingers grotesquely clutching the dirt as though attempting to retrieve her head, bare inches beyond her reach.

Bad luck for her, he thought, or later thought. He left the village forever, owning nothing but his name — and that given him by a stranger.

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* * *

He had acquired his name on the day of his birth, when his father, old Seamus McGarn, reeled into the pub. Already well-oiled through the diligent application of strong home-brew, McGarn called out for a beer.

"Me heir has arrived!" he shouted. "A wee stalling at the gate, but he's here!"

Someone in the crowd yelled out, "Likely he didn't care to come into the world, seeing his inheritance."

This might, at another time, have precipitated a brawl. McGarn was quick to anger and quick to use his fists, as were his fellows, for the poverty that clung to them did not teach brotherly love and tolerance but encouraged a constant Darwinian struggle.

McGarn was feeling uncommonly proud and pleased to be released from the long vigil of the birthing. "He'll be man enough to wrest a living from this blighted world, I tell you that. Fourteen pounds!"

"My God," someone blurted. "A full stone!"

Amid laughter, he was named.

Stone looked up at the hills ahead. Hundreds of birds, brown carrion feeders, flew over the green canopy and commenced to spiral slowly into the trees like muddy water down a drain. He had seen a dozen of these creatures on the plain below, a hunchbacked rabble pushing and shoving each other, snatching at the entrails of a dead antelope with much shrieking and flapping of wings. In the air they had a wind-borne grace that vanished when they touched the earth.

Stone inhaled deeply. For all its dangers and grotesqueries, he loved the jungle. This primitive continent had surely saved his life and set his soul free. The wildness of these African gods, with blood on their teeth and tongues, with not an ounce of mercy to quench a prayer, had renewed him. Without Africa, the sentences might have bound him fast, might have fastened round his chest like iron bands and pressed the air from his lungs, the blood from his heart.

He owed his freedom to the one called Hemingway. Not directly, of course, for the old man had killed himself in another world, another time.

The Librarian had asked him who, of the writers he was forced to read, did he admire most, and Stone had said, "Hemingway," although, in truth,

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Stone hated the lot of them, hated the way the books bred inaction, turned everything into words, the sun and the moon and the wildness of the sea and the lust for battle or for women. But he had learned that the Librarian's questions were always to be answered. He was not suited for solitary confinement.

So when the Librarian asked why, Stone answered, "He stands up."

The Librarian had not understood this, was not, perhaps, familiar with the habits of this Hemingway, and so Stone explained. "I've read that most writers slouch in chairs as they write, and those that don't, lie in bed scribbling away on pads of paper. Hemingway stood as he wrote." Hemingway's words showed this, showed a man who might walk, or run, from the words, forsaking them for the turbulent world of combat, of women, of storms upon the ocean.

"Ah," the Librarian said. "Yes." And yet it seemed the Librarian thought Stone's answer was a metaphor (an honest mistake, for many of the students deemed plain-speaking contemptible). Stone did not disabuse him of this notion, did not say that Hemingway's attraction lay not in his writing but in his willingness to forsake it, that the man was rightly skeptical of a vocation that harbored so many effete and degenerate types.

Stone's supposed admiration for Hemingway had lodged in the Librarian's mind. Not six months later, the Librarian called Stone into his office and said, "What would you say to seeing that Africa your Hemingway so loved? Seeing Kilimanjaro *itself*. What would you say?"

Yes was what Stone would say and did, his only reservation being that he had not killed the Librarian yet and now, if he wished to secure his freedom, might never have the chance.

As soon as the opportunity to leave the tour group presented itself, Stone took it and was gone.

Stone heaved a great sigh and left the past behind. He'd need a clear mind for the climb ahead. If the birds signified what he suspected, they would lead him to the Temple of The Librarian, held to be a myth by all those who had never been to this land and could not, as a consequence, fit their minds to its wonders.

He plunged into the jungle, moving easily at first between tall trees whose smooth trunks sprang upward for a hundred feet before raising

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limbs to the green ceiling. Here there was little undergrowth; light descended in long-slanted beams, light of an almost palpable density, celestial lumber propped up against the trees as though awaiting its destiny in the frame of some magnificent cathedral. Then, as the incline rose, the sense of exaltation diminished and died. The venerable giants were replaced by shorter, gnarled trees and dank explosions of vegetation with mottled and weirdly shaped leaves. Stone's attention was drawn to a squat plant whose waxy leaves curved to form chalice-shapes filled with a pale green liquid. In one such goblet, a thick-bodied insect struggled to escape, its antennae waving frantically as it sank beneath the surface. Stone turned away and pressed on. Lianas as thick as a man's thigh blocked his path. He unsheathed his machete and began to hack his way upward through florid, steaming vegetation and stubborn thickets that were armed with long thorns, and inhabited, as every swing of the machete revealed, by angry, stinging ants.

Stone proceeded with grim purpose. He would find the monster who had killed his mother and held him in long bondage. He would avenge an old wrong.

As Stone went on, the incline grew steeper, and he was forced to pull himself up, gripping the smooth trunks of the trees with one massive hand while battling the undergrowth with the machete. The hours fell away as he fought the jungle. As the light of day retreated, shadows grew. Every yawning black hole that was born in the hollow of a stone or in the cleft of a lightning-savaged tree seemed filled with red eyes and malevolent movement, glittering black against black.

When the rise ended — abruptly — the darkness gave way to a luminous sky. Stone found himself in a clearing where tall, silver grass undulated in a fair breeze. He stood up, only now aware that his climb had necessitated a crouched and crippled posture. Above him stars glinted like knives, like assassins attending the moon. He saw the waterfall tumbling from a stone cliff and only then heard it, although it made a roar that filled the air before entering the pool with a fanfare of roiling white spray. Stone hastened to the side of the pool, where he knelt amid the lichen-mottled rocks and thrust his face toward the clear water. Small angular fish exploded from his reflection; he drank. The water was cold with a brave taste of rock and metal. After the jungle, this place seemed a haven for

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gods, and Stone was tempted to spend the night here. In the morning, he would be rested and better equipped to deal with whatever awaited him.

But as he lifted his lips from the water, a small white object on the water's surface caught his eye. He reached for it. Something primal within recognized it with a thrill of revulsion. He lifted the wet, crumpled piece of ruled paper, pressed it smooth against his thigh, and read what the wretched student's hand had wrought:

GUILT IN THE SCARLET LETTER
BY NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE
by Harmon Perks

I read The Scarlet Letter so that I could write this paper. I have picked as my theme guilt.

Hawthorne was interested in how guilt reacted in people. He was especially interested in this aspect with adultery which is a sin that Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale completed. Arthur Dimmesdale is a minister, so the guilt is worse and causes a "scarlet letter" to appear on his chest. This is a symbol, but it looks like a red "A" and it might not really —

The writer had crossed out the next two lines with angry scribbles and then written, "I hate this book I hate this book I hate this book I hate this book I hate this book I hate this book I hate this book I hate — " before crumpling the paper and hurling it into the stream.

Stone uttered a powerful oath, one that he had vowed to use no more than five times in his life, honoring his mother by this frugality. He crushed the paper, his hand white-clenched as though it held an enemy's heart, and hurled it back into the pool. Confronted by such suffering, he could not wait until morning. He turned away from the pool and the surrounding glory of the meadow and plunged back into the jungle.

The darkness fought him with sharp spines, wet leaves, the resolute limbs of trees, spider webs, insects. Larger creatures followed him through the dark but did not attack, for Stone's bulk was considerable (he had fulfilled the promise of his birth-size), and no taint of fear could any beast detect, only the hot odor of rage and its hunger for release.

No starlight found him in the jungle, no hint of sky, nothing with

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which to fix a course, but his course was upward and he followed the ache in his legs, the route that bent his back.

He traveled for hours — three, by the feel of his calves. At some point, the anger engendered by the book reporter's anguish relented, allowing Stone to regain his senses. He understood that further effort might only take him away from his goal. So he found the blasted stump of a tree, hollowed like a throne, and he brushed out a nest of blind shrews (he recognized them by their fierce cries) and centipedes (their feathery feet), and wrapped himself in the rain poncho that bore the stamp of a warring nation two thousand miles to the north, a war whose outcome he no longer remembered.

He slept and dreamed or perhaps he did not sleep and only remembered; the images of his memory were so fragmented that they bore the look of dreams.

"We come here from across time to find the ones who might save us," the Librarian told the newly enslaved. They were in the auditorium that echoed his voice and made his breath audible. The students sat in hushed rows as the monitors moved down the aisles with supple wands capable of raising a welt.

As always, the Librarian was dressed in the same uniform the students wore.

When Stone was a child, new to Knowledge Base #29, he thought nothing of this, but later he realized it was an affectation of humility where no genuine humility existed, for the old man was thin and sharp-featured, and his uniform was precisely tailored, creating an impression of elegance without extravagance. Those uniforms worn by the students were another thing entirely. They were made of some shoddy material, gray and shapeless as rags, the pants wide and overly long, inducing a loutish shuffle.

The Librarian told them, again and again, that they were the hope of the future. He told them that he was *from* a future that was in need of hope, for the greatness of Mankind resided in its knowledge. In that future that was the Librarian's present, knowledge had been disrupted. All literature, all science, all history had been blown into smoke by some dark magic.

Stone thought, *What is it worth if a sorcerer can banish it to oblivion?*

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But the Librarian went on, as he always did. In the two months since his capture, Stone had already heard the story six times in its fullness, and every morning began with a shorter version as he and his classmates sang "Lost Glory" {"Our grandeur mourning, we watch a savage dawn unfolding"}. There was no forgetting that civilization was gone.

"I don't miss it," Stone told Lars Stoker, who immediately ran off and repeated that heresy to one of the headmasters, who came and punished Stone with some perfunctory swats.

The long and the short of it was this: what knowledge remained had wound up in books, those archaic rectangles of pulped wood. With those the world would be reborn to knowledge.

"My dad's gonna get me out of here," Stone told Lars, and Lars had replied, "I thought your dad was here. I heard — "

"He ain't."

"Well, he won't find you. Couldn't find you with a dozen bloodhounds."

"Why's that?" In truth, Stone doubted his dad would look much for him. They had never gotten along.

"This here school moves around. It's what you call mobile. Sliding in and out of space."

"Who told you that?"

"Nobody. But everybody knows it's so. Just look out the window, why don't ya? One day you got snow falling down on a lot of piney trees and the next day you got a alley full of garbage and cats. How do you explain that?"

Stone didn't try. He hit Lars with his fist, a good whack to the temple, and when Lars came around Stone said, "Go tell one of the headmasters I smacked you. You do that, and I'll smack you so hard you'll swallow your tongue and that will be the last of telling headmasters anything."

The logic of this was not lost on Lars.

One time Stone was reading about some made-up person who was wrestling and wrestling with his conscience because he'd killed somebody and couldn't make up his mind whether he should tell someone about it or not when any idiot with half a brain would know, with *no thought at all*, that telling was not a good idea and would only end in grief.

In a room of desks and half-dozing students, Stone turned the book

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face down, thinking, not for the first time, *If we are going to get knowledge, why can't we have more of the science and how-to knowledge and less of this literature*? But he knew the answer because it was another thing the Librarian went on about at every single rally and every single orientation. "It wasn't," the Librarian would boom over the speakers, "the lack of science that led to the end." It was the absence of compassion, the absence of empathy, the absence of *humanity* that brought civilization to its knees. So what needed to be stressed in this bunker where the flame of civilization burned with a small, hopeful light was *knowledge of the heart*. And where were you going to find that? In literature, of course!

Stone would have given a lot to trade *Crime and Punishment* for a book on how to make a small bomb using only kitchen and bathroom supplies. There was knowledge going dying in the world for want of attention, and Stone felt for it.

IN THE MORNING a band of monkeys woke Stone, shouting and leaping from branch to branch. They were overly pleased with their agility and sought to taunt Stone, who threw a net over the closest imp and, as it fought to untangle itself, screaming like a banshee, silenced it with his knife. Stone was always in a black humor in the morning, and hungry to boot. He made a small fire, rousing it with a flint. He carried spices with him, and these he rubbed into the animal's flesh. The spices failed to improve the taste or Stone's mood. He recalled that in Zaruba he had heard a tribesman describe the ancient chief there as a man with "no more savor than a Bakalu." The chief had been a very old man covered in dust [whether by design or happenstance, Stone never discovered]. Stone decided that he had just eaten a monkey of the Bakalu family.

He climbed the tallest tree and looked about him. The sun was out and already well-risen. He had slept later than was his wont, but that was one of his freedoms; he moved to no clock but his own.

He could see mountains in the far distance, bare stone wreathed in clouds. By his reckoning, the temple, if it had not been magicked away, was three or four hours' march ahead. As he watched, a flock of yellow butterflies floated over the trees, moving with a jaunty motion as though animated by music only they could hear. Then two loud explosions from

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below sent the butterflies wheeling away as half a dozen carrion birds flew out of the jungle, uttering their squawks and dirge-like cries.

So they are already shooing them off for the day, thought Stone. He fumbled in the pocket of his fatigues and produced the small gem that old N'Loopa had given him when they had both fought the wizard Mesu Pork, and he held the gem up to the light. Within it a red liquid flowed, always seeking the west, and by this he adjusted his course. His travel during the night had not been in vain; he was barely an hour from his destination.

II
The Temple of the Librarian

He spied the golden domes and turrets and strangely angled walls long before the whole of the building came into view. In fact, it could be said that the whole building never did present itself to his eye, for the temple stretched out and back and into the jungle so that its limits were not easily apparent. Indeed, Stone could not tell if it were a single building or a collection of buildings.

This was nothing like Knowledge Base #29, which was gray brick and stolidly drab. The ornate structure he now beheld could only be a thing of Africa, brown and gold and shining and somehow *of the earth,* bathed in the blood and dust of this savage land. Stone did not doubt that mountains of bones lay beneath this labyrinthine structure. It might now be the refuge of the Librarian, but it had been raised by an older race.

Despite its remote location, Stone assumed the temple would have guards and perhaps sophisticated instruments for spying out intruders. He proceeded carefully, remaining within the trees and tangled vegetation that came within fifty feet of the walls of the temple.

Another explosion chased more of the brown, ungainly scavengers into the air. They were to Stone's right, coming up over a red and brown domed roof. One of the birds landed clumsily in the branch of a tree just thirty feet to Stone's right. They didn't scare far, these creatures, being fearless or, more likely, addled by the promise of a feast.

Stone continued his slow progress around the building, staying in the shadows and moving cautiously, always assuming that someone or something watched.

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He saw them then. A familiar revulsion, a sense of suffocation, rolled over him, as though he were imprisoned again in their company.

The green, gentle hill with its well-manicured grass and tamed fruit trees was littered with the bodies of students. Not a one of them moved. They sprawled, leaned against trees, sat with their knees crossed, and all of them were studying. Books held them in thrall, eyes were willed to pages. The students were of both sexes, sometimes together, but always locked in separate trances as though this learning, this *literature*, exuded mind-killing vapors that immobilized its victims. The frenzy in the loins to mate, even this proud imperative, the progenitor of wars and fine heroic deeds, was stilled by the paralysis of *study*. This was death's image, even if the breath still stirred within. Wasn't it enough to fool the carrion birds? And if the monitors failed to fire the guns when the birds proved too bold, would the birds move yet closer...and feed?

The mere proximity of these students chilled his limbs. A wave of nausea overcame him, as though a powerful vertigo spell had found its mark, and he remembered the dreaded books.

"Call me Ishmael," one book began. Not a hundred pages through and dead sick of whales, Stone called the writer many things, "long-winded" being the least of them. But you weren't allowed to call it quits. They devised tests to see if you had truly read the thing, with solitary confinement awaiting those who failed.

Damnable books: *The Iliad, Silas Marner, Vanity Fair*.... The thought of Thackeray...Stone almost blacked out. Sometimes Stone would have a vision of an old man lying in bed, eating chocolates from a box, obese and in failing health, and talking and talking, occasionally shaking an admonitory finger, smiling or frowning, lecturing, unaware that everyone had left, that no one *cared* what he was saying. A book was an old man, impotent and raging, or, worse, self-doting beyond madness, a prattling assertion of ego.

Sometimes, in the years of his imprisonment, Stone broke away from slumber in a blazing fever, grabbed from the nightstand something by one of the infamous Jameses (Henry or Joyce), flipped wildly through the pages — and, full of dizzy revelation, saw precisely what the writer was getting at. He would jump up and run down the halls, banging on doors, awakening his fellow students. Waving the book in the face of some sleep-dazed

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wretch, he would explain. Yes. He would explain until someone roused the house monitor and a couple of orderlies were summoned. They would tackle and sedate him.

"Nonsense," Lars Stoker told him on the morning after one such episode. "Weren't even words you were saying, just gibberish like."

"'Gibberish?'"

"Yeah, you know, like *bibble bleep bah jabber ho spinnish sputtle hoo*!"

Stone could never remember anything beyond the rush, that sense of having finally got it. Alas, it was a delusion, for when he revisited a book that made no sense prior to the episode, it was, again, an implacable wall. After one such episode, he reopened the Faulkner that had been the catalyst for his derangement and found it as impenetrable as ever. He might as well try to puzzle out the thought processes of a giant squid mulling things over at the bottom of the night-black sea. And he had thought he *understood*! He roared with laughter, laughter so violent that it convulsed his body. He broke out of his restraints and ran down the hall, smashing through to the adjoining ward where suicidal young women who had recently read *The Bell Jar* moped around like swamp wraiths. It had taken five orderlies to subdue him.

Now was not the time for indulging the past. The students, the carefully composed lawn, the massive walls of the temple, all seemed to urge passivity, another name for death.

Although time might reveal the manner and placement of guards, he could not wait. To remain here would be to surrender to inaction, perhaps to never move again.

He moved. With the speed and agility that had kept him whole among jungle and desert predators (including the human ones), Stone raced over the grass and reached the wall, releasing the grappling rope from his waist even as he ran, and threw the grappling hook high where it caught on the lip of an ornate ledge. To anyone watching, it might seem that he ran up the wall and disappeared by supernatural means.

In fact, as soon as he found the roof he threw his poncho around him, and the poncho, made for a desert war (made as a hammer is made to recognize a nail), turned itself the mottled red and brown of the roof.

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Under this camouflage, Stone crouched and ran to a small domed shed that protruded from the roof. Above him, he spied three evenly spaced watchtowers, each containing the tall silhouette of a guard whose right hand clenched a spear-like silver weapon. The door to the shed was locked, but no match for Stone's resolution and the thick sinews of his arms.

It was dark within. Stone descended a short flight of stairs and discovered a large storage space filled with casks, crates, armor, rusting weapons of mass destruction, and boxes filled with books and ammunition. Stone's mercenary days had taught him the look of fine weapons. Here, hanging from the stone wall, was a silver sword of great beauty and strength. He lifted it from the wall. When he pushed the button at its base, the blade seemed to shimmer, an illusion created by twin blades moving with uncanny speed. This was a sword to cut through stone and steel and bone.

He made his way to the end of the room where yet another door awaited him. This door opened on a long corridor illuminated by dozens of brass torches that simulated fire. Moving quickly down the hallway, he heard voices to his right and moved toward them — it was not his inclination to hide — and almost immediately the owners of the voices rounded a corner and came into view.

He saw a teacher, dressed in traditional garb, a tweed jacket, elbow patches that signified thoughtfulness (thought required considerable leaning on the elbows), and an ill-groomed beard, brown and flecked with silver, which some called — it was all coming back to Stone — a tenure. The man was accompanied by five students, two male and three female, who stayed very close to him, almost hugging him, and bent low, a posture that allowed them to look upward into the face of their mentor who was short and yet, by his station, demanded upward gazes.

Spying Stone, they all stopped abruptly, gone mute until one of their group, a beardless boy, spoke, "Who's this, Professor?"

"I have no idea," the professor said, frowning. "He's not a level two, so he has no business here. Where is your uniform, young man?"

"I gave my uniform to a leper in Wantoga," Stone said. "Had he not been naked, he would have refused the gift, I'm sure."

"What's your name?"

"Stone. And yours?"

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The professor smiled, turning slowly so his students could read his amusement. "Well, this fellow is grilling me like a first year, isn't he?" The students giggled, and the professor, easily encouraged, began to recite a cynical, archly insulting poem.

That is, Stone took the poem for an insult, but there was no way he could know for sure. He could never know what lay within a poem. The runic words, the incantatory rhythm, seemed a threat filled with sorcerer's guile. A blinding red haze filled his eyes — this had always been so — as the madness of the warrior rose up. He leaned forward and sank the humming blade deep into the man's heart.

Stone looked at the balding academic, lying in a pool of blood, his thinning hair an accusation (*You've killed a feeble foe!*), and thought, *He shouldn't have poemed me.*

The students fled down the hall. Instantly, Stone was restored to his senses. A loud ringing filled the halls, the same ringing that used to send every student into the pavilion back at Knowledge Base #29. Stone felt a need to go outside and stand in a line, but he was pleased to discover that this old imprinting no longer ruled him. He turned and ran in the other direction, spied a door on his right and wrenched it open. He ran quickly up the stairs.

The Librarian would be above him. The old man loved a view, loved to sweep his hands before a window as though petitioning the world, and he would be up there in some high vaulted room, up there minding the clouds.

Finally, Stone came to the topmost step and broke in another door. More than a dozen armed guards, bristling with swords, greeted him. Their faces were dark, glowering, their shoulders wide — formidable brutes, but not, Stone thought, bound by loyalty. He knew the mercenary's eye, having lived among them, and for all their love of money, they loved their own blood more and would bolt if the work of killing cost too much of their own red stuff.

"Good then!" Stone shouted. "Your numbers tell me that something of value must be lodged behind that door! Some treasure? Your master, I think."

He moved into them with a roar, his humming sword low. He crouched, lunged, moving with such speed that the gleam of his blade left

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a shining cross in the air, a swordsman's benediction. Stone stepped over the fallen bodies. Others filled the void immediately and died as quickly. Shouts and imprecations thundered in the hall. Stone's foes pressed forward with howling determination, thinking to overcome him with numbers, but their swords broke on his spinning one, and the swords that breached Stone's defenses (succeeding by sheer number) shattered on his desert armor (made from the hides of sentient lizards from the distant planet Celicus, where they basked and rolled in fire as cats will yawn and stretch in a sunbeam).

As Stone had guessed — *no, it was a certainty*! — they turned and fled.

With a wan smile, Stone watched the last of them round the corner. They could have killed him with their numbers, but each of them could not count past himself, an army of one, no army that.

THIS LAST DOOR would not be broken into by brute force. This Stone knew, but he had not come unprepared. He removed the gem that his old friend N'Loopa had given him, hearing again his old friend's words, "This be *seek* rock, some say Eye of Old God called sometimes Abathoth. Can find your way on journey, sure, but more more power too. Find man or woman's heart. Find lost thing. Find hidden thing."

Stone held the gem up to the door, as one might hold a candle up to illuminate a murky corridor. The gem cast an eerie, greenish light that uncovered what cunning spells sought to conceal from human eyes. Upon the door, strange runes were drawn in a square, and, as Stone looked on, one symbol grew brighter, then faded as another underwent the same transformation, dark to bright then dark again. Some primal voice spoke to Stone without words, without sound. Stone knew what to do. He leaned forward and touched each symbol as it shone.

When the cycle had completed, the door swung open silently. Stone entered the room with his sword held high. The Librarian was motionless, slumped forward on his desk, a small lamp illuminating his bald pate.

Stone thought to slay him in his sleep. The old man's power and cunning were not to be underestimated. And the advantage of surprise was not to be traded for some misguided notion of fair play.

Even as Stone thought this, the Librarian looked up.

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"Son," the Librarian said, "your mother's been worried sick. Where have you been?"

Stone spoke, undaunted: "I have been many places. I have fought and reveled in lands beyond Atlantis and Mu, beyond the reach of your assassins. I have stood under a midnight sky where three moons illuminated the naked daughters of Lenthe, Goddess of Lust, as they danced their lascivious dances and fought for my seed."

The Librarian sighed. "Your mother went to bed in tears. I told her I'd wait up."

"My mother was killed by your minions when I was just a child. And I am no son of yours. I doubt my father is alive, for — "

"Yes, the mines of that small village you grew up in are dangerous." The Librarian shook his head, expressing fatigue, disgust. "It was a simple field trip to the Museum of Natural History, Edward. Mr. Miller was extremely upset when he discovered you'd slipped away from the group. I assured him that it has happened before and that you'd turn up. That assurance didn't keep your mother from hysterics. I finally talked her into taking a sedative."

"My mother is *dead*," Stone said. "And I have had enough of your words."

The Librarian smiled. "Do you intend to hit me with that umbrella, Edward?"

Stone's eyes rose slowly to his clenched hand. The sword was *gone* — and in his hand, instead: *a thin black umbrella*!

Stone felt the strength go out of him. The blue smoke that encircled him was not, as he had foolishly assumed, the familiar effluvium produced by the Librarian's pipe. No, this was some insidious vapor that distorted —

And then that thought was gone, and Stone lost consciousness before the floor smote his forehead.

III
Remembrance of Things Past

He went to the classes and returned to his room. How long he had done this, he did not know.

"I think I'm overmedicated," he told the school's physician, who

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nodded and said, "Probably. In time we can reduce the dosage, but for now...." He shrugged. "Better safe than sorry."

They called him Edward, a name he hated. "Call me, Ed, okay?" he said.

So his fellow students called him Ed. His teachers insisted on Edward, to taunt him, he assumed.

This day he lay on the bed and opened the new novel they had assigned him. *At least,* he thought, *it's a short one.*

It was about some teenager named Holden. It was "written" by Holden, although it wasn't really written by him. There was a writer out there who had really written the book, pretending to be Holden.

Ed hated this, hated the levels of the lie, the depth of dissembling. In the novel, this Holden kid calls everyone a "phony," and complains about everything and doesn't do much of anything, just drifts around, and talks about how he'd like to be the one who stands around watching children play in a meadow where there's a cliff. This imaginary teenager's imaginary job would be to grab a kid up if he strayed too near the cliff's edge. Only: *Why have children playing in such a dangerous place just so you could be a hero?* Ed thought Holden was a silly, coddled creature. But Holden wasn't real, was as blameless as the air. The person responsible for Holden's inflated ego and miserable personality was this Salinger who wrote the book, this fool, this writer, making a voice in his head, imitating the accent, the gestures, the slouch, *imagining* this whiny teenager. Ed couldn't exactly explain why this was so enraging. This Holden Caulfield was a worthless waste of time, and that was bad enough, but it seemed a thousand times worse that someone had intentionally brought Holden to life. What an abomination: *a listless author giving birth to a listless teenager!*

That night Ed tossed and turned in his sleep and was harried by fantastical dreams that he could not remember, dreams that left him covered with sweat. In the morning, he resolved to stop taking his pills. He went to a drugstore on Livingston and bought a bottle of vitamin C pills that were white, oval shapes — just like the pills he swallowed each morning. He poured these pills into a plastic sandwich bag and walked down to the medical annex where Nurse Werther was drinking coffee and watching the news on the overhead television. She sighed the way she

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always did when anyone interrupted her, as though she wasn't being paid to dispense medications but did it out of the goodness of her heart, despite the ingratitude of those she served.

When she came back with the pill bottle, Ed pretended to stumble. He grabbed at the table to right himself, and Nurse Werther's coffee went over.

"Shaw!" she shouted. As she ran off to get a paper towel, Ed grabbed the bottle, turned away from the retreating nurse, opened the bottle and poured its contents into his left pocket. Another few seconds, and he had emptied the plastic bag's contents into the bottle and screwed the cap back on. Nurse Werther hadn't returned. When she did, and when she had finished mopping up the spilled coffee while sighing copiously, she watched Ed take his pill.

Tomorrow and the next day and the next day, he would dutifully come in and take his vitamin C.

Three weeks later, Ed finished the obligatory book report. His report began, "If I met Holden Caulfield in an alley, I would kill him with a rock," but he didn't hand that one in. He didn't want trouble. So he pretended he was one of the prissy girls in the class, and he wrote about how much he liked the book, and he used the word "alienation" because that was his teacher's favorite word that month.

He went to classes. Time turned the color of a rain-laden sky. When people called him Edward, it didn't bother him so much.

"Many people consider this the greatest novel of the twentieth century," the professor said.

Wonderful, Edward thought. He was in a different part of the university now, and here the level of complexity was deeper. Many of his fellow students never finished a sentence, so besieged were they by elaborate, subtle thoughts.

At least I don't have to read it in French, he thought, as he studied Volume 1, which contained four novels, the first half of this imposing masterpiece. He flipped through the pages of the book. There were 1,141 of them. Many pages were flat blocks of small type with no indentions, no paragraphs. The translator was a man named C. K. Scott Moncrieff, and

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Edward wondered if that was a pseudonym but realized he didn't really care.

With trepidation that was immediately validated, he began reading the first paragraph:

> For a long time I used to go to bed early. Sometimes, when I had put out my candle, my eyes would close so quickly that I had not even time to say, "I'm going to sleep."

Two sentences in, and his brain already felt dull and heavy. His eyes traveled over several sentences before his attention kicked in again:

> ...Then it would begin to seem unintelligible, as the thoughts of a former existence must be to a reincarnate spirit; the subject of my book would separate itself from me, leaving me free to choose whether I would form part of it or no; and at the same time my sight would return and I would be astonished to find myself in a state of darkness, pleasant and restful enough for the eyes, and even more, perhaps, for my mind, to which it appeared incomprehensible, without a cause, a matter dark indeed.

Edward read on. No one had to tell him that this Proust guy wrote while lying down. The convoluted sentences induced a fever state that destroyed his sense of time.

Edward stopped attending classes, but in this crowded university, away from the usual parental supervision, his absence was not noted, and he did manage to drop by the medical annex for his vitamin C dose, so Nurse Werther wouldn't raise an alarm.

He was free to dream. He lost all sense of the convoluted sentences, and they began to devour him. He could make no clear distinction between reading and staring at the ceiling. He had heard other students speak of this lack of clarity, the way the sinuous thoughts would turn to sounds, cadences that induced trance states. He thought he might die, but felt no sense of fear. He was interested only in describing this state with the longest sentence he could fashion.

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He hadn't eaten in days, perhaps weeks. Could one not eat for weeks? He stumbled toward the bed and fell. He grabbed an end table to steady himself, but it accompanied him downward, and a drawer fell out, tumbling as it fell. The bottom of the drawer was revealed, and on it, lashed with silver tape, was a book. Edward peeled away the tape and studied the book, a paperback. The end table, which he had brought from home, was old, and the book had clearly been affixed to its hiding place long ago. He thought he remembered it, remembered reading it surreptitiously, late at night, the way one might remember eating a crumpet with some tea in some long ago past. He studied its garish cover, an oil painting of massive cavemen marching out of the mist of some brutal prehistoric dawn. A pale white woman is draped over the gigantic shoulder of one such brute. She is as white, *whiter*, than the moon above. She is naked.

Edward lay on the bed reading the book. Halfway through the first story, a sharp knife stabbed his stomach. He identified the knife: hunger. He ate the cheese and ham in the refrigerator, washing it down with six or seven beers. He ate a loaf of bread. He had bought these groceries some time ago. There may have been mold growing on some of the items, but he did not care. He was not fastidious.

He slept soundly and was roughly awakened by a man he felt he ought to know.

"You're alive," the man said. He was a big man, and his eyes burned with impatience.

"Who are you?" Edward asked.

"You know," the man said, and Edward was surprised to discover that he did know. This was the man who had made the sentences his slaves and so escaped the dust and tedium of West Texas.

"They said you were dead."

"They would say that, wouldn't they?"

Of course they would!

The man leaned closer, his eyes solemn, intense. "The real question," he said, "is who are *you*?"

Edward would have said he didn't know, but the answer was on his tongue when he opened his mouth. "Stone."

The man nodded and turned away. "I've taken the liberty of breaking this window. You're a sound sleeper." He waited, as though Stone might

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want to refute this. Stone said nothing — and the man continued. "I thought you might wish to leave without attracting attention." Then the man was in the window, a silhouette, and then he was gone. Without hesitation, Stone followed, leaping into the night, the star-bright air roaring in his ears like the welcoming roar of a vast crowd. The soles of his shoes slapped down on the asphalt parking lot; he stumbled forward, but he did not fall. He looked around at the campus, the rows of stark winter trees against the mist-enshrouded lamps, the stately admin building to his right, dormitories one through eight receding in the distance like some trick of a mirror or too much to drink.

"Come on!" the man shouted. He was on down the path; another ten feet and he would disappear behind the tall evergreens that lined Burroughs Way. He raised his arm, and described an urgent arc. "Come on!" he shouted. "We'll be safe once we reach the jungle!"

And Stone knew he was right. ☆

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Last year, our serialization of Terry Bisson's "Planet of Mystery" went over well, so we thought we'd oblige readers with another two-part adventure. This one comes courtesy of Matthew Hughes, whose tales from the Penultimate Age of Old Earth have made him one of our most popular writers in recent years. "The Helper and His Hero" marks the culmination of the sequence of Guth Bandar stories he has been spinning (all of which will be assembled into a novel and published in June as The Commons*). Readers of Mr. Hughes's novel* Black Brillion *will find many echoes of that story in this tale...but actually, you need not have read any of the past stories to enjoy this one. You doubt? Read on and see—*

The Helper and His Hero

Part 1

By Matthew Hughes

GUTH BANDAR WAS ADRIFT in a formless, limitless, gray nothing. Above him was nothing, ahead and to all sides was nothing, and below was nothing. But no, far down (an arbitrary direction — it was simply the view between his feet), something moved. Something tiny that, as he watched, grew larger as it came toward him.

Now Bandar felt a shiver of fear. For this no-place could be only one place. He was adrift in the Old Sea of preconsciousness, the inert and timeless realm that underlay the collective unconscious of humanity. Only one thing moved in the Old Sea: the great blind Worm that endlessly swam its "waters" in search of its own tail. And only one thing could divert the Worm from its eternal, futile quest. As early noönauts had discovered when they had hacked their way through the floor of the Commons and dipped into the pearl gray nothingness beneath, the Worm sensed any consciousness that entered the Old Sea — and inerrantly swam to devour it.

It is a dream, of course, Bandar told himself. He applied the noönaut

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techniques that would allow him to take charge of the dream, to change its dynamic, or to wake from it.

But nothing happened. He floated in nothingness, and the Worm came on. Now it seemed as long as his hand. In moments it looked to be the length of his forearm, its undulating motion hypnotically compelling his gaze. Bandar looked away, sought to concentrate on the techniques of lucid dreaming, but when he looked again, the Worm was as long as his leg. Its great dark circle of a mouth, rimmed with triangular teeth, grew larger as he watched.

A wave of panic swept through him. He flailed against the nothingness, as if he could swim away. But there was nothing to push against, nowhere to go even if he could somehow achieve motion. And still the Worm rose beneath him, its gaping maw now as wide as a housefront and still relentlessly enlarging.

"What do you want?" Bandar called into the void. There could be only one agent behind this: the Multifacet, the entity that was the collective unconscious paradoxically become conscious of itself, that for its own obscure ends had ruined Bandar's career only to abandon him. Was it now back, with some new demand? Or had it, as he had often feared, simply gone mad and tossed him into the Old Sea, for no other reason than that it had the awful power to do so?

The mouth of the Worm loomed beneath him now like a black moon, still rising. "Tell me what you want!" Bandar screamed, while a part of his mind offered him the obvious answer: *maybe it just wants you eaten.*

"I did everything you asked!" he cried. "What do you want now?"

And as the Worm rose to swallow him a voice from the nothingness said, "More."

Bandar awoke in his comfortable seat in the well-appointed gondola of the midafternoon balloon-tram, the dream-fear fading along with all memory of the Worm. He discovered that, while he had been dozing, two late arrivals must have boarded just before the conveyance lifted off from the terminal in the heart of Olkney.

One of the two would have drawn attention wherever he went, for he was quite possibly the fattest person Bandar had ever seen, although he was light enough on his feet as he made his way among the scattered

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armchairs in which passengers disposed themselves for the trip to Farflung, at the edge of the Swept, the great, unnaturally flat sea of grass that Bandar had always longed to travel.

The fat one's companion was a young man in nondescript garb wearing a slightly soiled cravat that identified him as a third-tier graduate of the Archon's Institute for Instructive Improvement, where the great and the titled had sent their children from time immemorial; its history faculty was tangentially connected to Bandar's alma mater, the Institute for Historical Inquiry.

But it was not the possibility of academic connection that gave the noönaut a start; rather, it was a fixity of expression and a fierceness about the eyes that gave Bandar the impression that the young man's features might never have arranged themselves into the full complement of expressions that a normal human visage displays over a lifetime, even a short one. Bandar allowed this initial impression to linger in his mind while he sought to see what associations it might conjure up from his unconscious. Moments later, a series of images floated onto his inner screen, and he was surprised to note that all of them were faces he had encountered in the Commons; he realized that the stranger, who was now seating himself across the gondola's wide aisle and engaging in low-voiced argument with the fat man, showed the same simplicity of character as that of an idiomatic entity.

When the steward brought round a tray of wine and delicacies, the noönaut used the distraction to sneak another glance at the two men. He now saw a definite contrast between them. Across the plump one's multi-chinned face a succession of micro-expressions chased each other: mild irritation, bemusement, curiosity, and the indulgence shown toward a child whose behavior straddles the narrow line between amusing and aggravating. But the young man's face showed nothing but righteous anger, unalloyed by doubt or even self-consciousness, and with an intensity that Bandar found unnerving.

Fortunately, whatever concerns motivated the strange young man were none of Bandar's. He turned away and looked out the gondola's wide window. The spires and terraces of Olkney were dropping below him as the balloon from which the gondola hung was allowed to rise to its cruising height. Soon he felt the slight tug of the umbilicus that connected

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the balloon to its dolly, now far below. The gondola rocked gently then settled as the operator engaged the system that brought the materials of which the dolly was formed into contact with the track into which it was slotted. A collaboration of energies moved the dolly forward, at first slowly, then with increasing speed, towing the tapered cylinder of the balloon and its underslung gondola in a smooth and silent passage.

Bandar's ambition to travel the Swept had long been frustrated. It was a vast, wild land, almost entirely unpopulated except for some brillion miners. The great flatness, with its shoulder-high grass, was prowled by dangerous wildlife: omnivorous garm, both the lesser and greater species; sinewy fand, with needle teeth and ravenous appetite; and the huge but cunning woollyclaw, its well concealed burrows often full of hungry whelps.

The Swept had never been repopulated after its artificial creation eons before, during a desperate effort to repel the last aggressive invasion of Old Earth by a vicious predatory hive species known as the Dree. A gravitational aggregator, normally used to assemble asteroids into convenient conglomerations, was brought down to crush the invaders and their legions of hapless human mind-slaves in their warren of tunnels. But the immense gravitational waves had created resonances deep in the planet's core; even today cysts and bubbles of various sizes and intensities rose to the surface, though no one could predict where or when. A building that happened to be in the path of a rising anomaly could find the weight of its components drastically and suddenly reordered, leading to a collapse. Persons traveling on foot faced the same peril, and flying was advisable only in emergencies.

There were two safe ways to travel the Swept. One was to take passage on a landship, a great-wheeled wind-driven vessel built with enough flexibility to withstand minor anomalies and capable of steering clear of major ones. But landships catered to the truly affluent; Bandar had never been able to afford a cruise lasting weeks and the landships did not offer day trips. The less costly option was to hire a Rover to take him out onto the Swept in a two-wheeled cart drawn by shuggra. The Rovers were a fabricated species, developed from canines during a past age when trifling with life's elementary constituents was approved of. They lived as hunters and guides on the Swept, served by their innate ability to sense gravitational fluxions.

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That ability would have made the Rovers ideal for Bandar's purposes — he wished to study the effects of gravity on the formulation of noöspheric corpuscles, and the anomalies offered unique experimental conditions — but Rovers disliked gravitational fluctuations. They used their senses to avoid the phenomena Bandar sought.

He had taken the balloon-tram to Farflung twice before, during rare vacations from the housewares emporium, and each time he had tried to engage Rover guides. For his second trip, he had even learned the odd, gobbling sounds of their speech. But the moment he made his request, any Rover he approached looked down and away and professed to know nothing of anomalies, or declared himself already engaged, or under some nebulous obligation that prevented him from accommodating Bandar.

The balloon-tram was now passing the Institute for Historical Inquiry, and Bandar looked down upon the cloisters in which he had never again been allowed to set foot after the Institute's dons judged him responsible for plunging Didrick Gabbris into permanent psychosis. That was now decades ago, and Bandar no longer let his powerful memory take him to that painful time. But the noönaut's heart still harbored a desire to return to the Institute in triumph. He would present the Grand Colloquiam with irrefutable new facts. If that meant overturning dogmas grown dusty over millennia, then so be it. And now that he was able at last to travel the Swept, Bandar saw victory as a glimmering prospect.

It bothered him only slightly that he had connived, and indeed had probably broken a statute or two, in order to gain passage on the landship *Orgulon*. The cruise was offered free to persons suffering from the lassitude, the first new disease to strike the human population of Old Earth. Bandar did not have the lassitude; indeed, he knew no one who did. Astonishing himself by his own boldness, he had invented an afflicted brother and offered forged documents to the organizers. A few days later, a pair of tickets had arrived. Bandar threw one away. The other was in an inner pocket of his traveling mantle.

He turned back from the window to take another glass of wine from the steward and found that the fat man had fallen asleep in his chair while the young one was staring at Bandar with an almost palpable intensity. Again, the noönaut was startled, but it soon became apparent that the fellow hardly noticed him, that his stare was merely the outer sign of a

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deep introspection. Again, too, he was struck by the quality of otherness in the young man's eyes: they would not have looked out of place in the skull of some mad prophet.

Now the strange eyes blinked and focused on Bandar. The noönaut made the gestures appropriate between travelers whose ranks were unknown to each other and said, "By your scarf, may I take you for a graduate of the Archon's Institute?"

The young man fingered his neck cloth. "Yes," he said.

"May I ask if you studied history?"

"No. Criminology." He had a brusque manner of speech, but Bandar sensed that it was not intended to offend. He began to speak his name, then seemed to catch himself before declaring himself one Phlevas Wasselthorpe, of the minor aristocracy. The man snoring beside him was his mentor, Erenti Abbas.

Bandar introduced himself and said, "It would have been a convenient coincidence if you had studied history. I, myself, have spent most of my life dealing in housewares. I am now retired and taking a full-time interest in my longstanding avocation: the study of history, specifically the history of the Swept."

Bandar turned the conversation toward a discussion of what was on his mind: the Dree invasion. Wasselthorpe, surprising for an Institute graduate, even third-tier, had never heard of it. He asked questions, and Bandar sketched the outline of events and mentioned his intent to study the gravitational residues.

It was clear from the young man's face that the Dree did not interest him. He abruptly turned to another issue for which the Swept was famous, asking what Bandar knew about brillion mining. Bandar knew what everyone knew: brillion was a catch-all name for substances formed in the depths of the Earth from waste products deposited by the dawn-time's wastrel civilizations. Old Earth's original inhabitants, scarcely out of the caves, had fashioned many materials, natural and artificial, to use but once, then throw away. This ancient detritus was dumped into depressions, plowed under, and capped by layers of earth. Most was eventually dug up to become fodder for mass-conversion systems; however, some of the societies that had created these deposits being later destroyed or relocated, the whereabouts of many dumps were forgotten. Over geological

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time, the shallow deposits were gradually buried beneath accumulated rock. Some were drawn even deeper into the planet by tectonic motions, and then the same forces that make diamond from coal worked upon the rich variety of substances that paleohumans had promiscuously mixed together. The result was brillion, and it came in several varieties: blue, red, and white were the main types, though they could be found in some interesting blends. Each had its properties and uses.

And then there was the rarest of all: black brillion, a substance so rare and precious that those who found it never advertised the news. Or so it was said. It was also said the stuff could work wonders. Bandar reserved his opinion, though Wasselthorpe pressed for a definitive answer.

Their voices awoke the fat man, Abbas. He joined the conversation and his contributions made it less an interrogation and more the kind of amiable chat engaged in by travelers with persons they were unlikely to encounter again. At some point, Bandar revealed his true vocation. Abbas said, "Ah," in a manner that implied both knowledge and interest, but his companion had never heard of the Commons and thus began a new interrogation.

Bandar was always happy to talk about the noösphere. But as he did so now he saw the young man seize upon the subject with an intensity that Bandar found unsettling. He sought to redirect the conversation back to the Swept.

"It has long been known that the existence of the Commons is in some way connected to gravity," he said. "It is difficult to access in space, for example, and some have said that human experiences that have taken place beyond gravity wells do not register strongly and are lost to the common memory."

Abbas responded to the diversion, wondering if the gravitational anomalies might enhance Bandar's abilities as a noönaut. It was a pertinent question and Bandar now noticed that attached to the lapel of his robe were the pin and pendant of a runner-up for the Fezzani Prize, a notable academic achievement. He responded as if he were addressing a colleague. "Indeed," he said. "I am hopeful of conducting some remarkable research. Out of it may come the seed of a small institute."

"The Bandar Institute," Abbas said, and the words voiced an idea Bandar had never put so bluntly. But now the other one was boring in with

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a question about how the Commons might figure in the field of criminal investigation. It struck Bandar that criminology was an odd pursuit for a member of the aristocracy, even a rustic. He did not want to go off on a monomaniac's tangent and answered lightly, then followed with a brief dissertation on the formation and activities of engrammatic cells, corpuscles, and archetypical entities, knowing from experience that technical language would swiftly chase away casual interest. But Wasselthorpe's eyes failed to glaze and he continued to regard Bandar with an unsettling intensity.

"But where is this noösphere?" he said. "Where do your engrams and archetypes do their work?"

Bandar tapped the back of the Wasselthorpe's skull, then his own head and Abbas's. "In all of us."

He saw comprehension dawn in the young man's face, then puzzlement. Wasselthorpe said he thought the collective unconscious was mere myth.

To Bandar, myth was never "mere." Myth was always an expression of fundamental truth. He would have led the discussion along other paths but again the young fellow demonstrated his unnerving literal-mindedness. He quoted Bandar from a few moments ago, when the noönaut had told him that a traveler of the Commons needed a good memory and a knack for detail. He declared that he had both.

Bandar decided it was time to ease this peculiar young man out of an apparent enthusiasm that might lead to obsession. To test Wasselthorpe's memory, he said, "How many doors were in the waiting room at the balloon-tram station, in which walls were they set, and what was written on each?"

Wasselthorpe paused only a moment before saying, "Four doors, two in the west wall, one each in the north and south. The two in the west wall advertised ablutories for males and females, the one in the north wall was for a closet holding supplies, and the southern door led to the station master's office." He added, "That door had a scratch in the paint above the handle."

Bandar was as impressed by the power of Wasselthorpe's eidetic memory as he was concerned by the intensity with which he had answered the challenge. But it was a violation of his noönaut's oath not to respond

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to a potential candidate for training. With some trepidation, he offered to test the young fellow's aptitude.

Wasselthorpe declared himself keen. Bandar threw a querying glance Abbas's way, but receiving only the facial equivalent of a shrug, he explained the different mental images that a traveler might envision as the initial portal to the Commons.

"I will see a door," Wasselthorpe said, with complete certainty. Then he wanted to know what would be behind it.

"Let us not skip before we can hop," said Bandar, and was amused to hear in his own voice the dry tone of Preceptor Huffley, who had said the same words to him, long years ago. The Commons was dangerous for anyone; for some, it was indescribably perilous.

The warning did nothing to blunt the young man's interest. The gleam in the eyes that were now locked upon his made Bandar uncomfortable. The noönaut lowered his gaze to his hands as he briefly sketched the arrangement of the psyche.

"For now, I think we should go no farther than up to the first door," Bandar said. "If you can hold it in your mind's eye for a few moments, that will show an aptitude."

Wasselthorpe was eager to make the attempt.

Bandar bade the young man close his eyes and still his limbs, then instructed him on the regulation of his breathing. The noönaut was surprised that, within moments, Wasselthorpe appeared well settled.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"I am," said Wasselthorpe, and Bandar heard in the undertones of his voice nothing that bespoke unwillingness among any of the less obvious components of the fellow's psyche. It was yet another unusual response from a complete beginner.

"I will teach you the introductory thran," he said. He sounded a sequence of tones and asked Wasselthorpe to copy him. The thran came back note-perfect and again Bandar heard no microquavers to indicate that some element of the young man's psyche opposed what they were about to do. *How rare,* he thought.

They continued to intone the thran for a few moments, then Bandar broke off to say, "When you see anything that might be a door, raise one finger."

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He resumed the chant, expecting some time to go by before he saw a response. Instead, scarcely had he sounded the first few notes before Wasselthorpe was holding a digit almost beneath Bandar's nose. The deep conviction in the young man's chanting voice strengthened even further.

It came to Bandar that he might be in the presence of a seriously unbalanced mind. The young stranger's intensity of focus could be the mark of a natural. If so, to plunge his consciousness into the Commons would have immediate and disastrous results: he would be sharing the confined space of a balloon-tram gondola with a full-blown psychotic.

Even as he followed his thought to its frightening conclusion, Bandar saw Wasselthorpe's still elevated hand move forward, fingers curling as if to grasp. *He not only sees the portal but reaches to open it*, Bandar thought. He immediately ceased chanting and called in a peremptory voice: "Enough! Come back!"

Wasselthorpe gave a start. The hand that had been reaching out now subsided to the arm of the young man's chair. Bandar rose to stand over him and shook his shoulder. Abbas sat forward in his chair, concern on his many-chinned face.

The young man's eyes opened, blinking, and Bandar was relieved to see them fill with awareness. He let out a pent breath and said, "You were too fast! I almost lost you."

Wasselthorpe seemed unfazed. "I saw a light shining from behind the door," he said. "And my own hand was reaching to open it."

A shock went through Bandar. "You saw light and made a hand, though you had never heard of any of this before?"

Wasselthorpe said that he was not inclined to tease. Abbas vouched for the truth of the statement, describing his companion as "no bubbling fount of mirth."

Bandar passed a hand across his brow, felt cold moisture. He had never seen nor heard of such aptitude. Bandar had been talented, but it had taken weeks of instruction and practice before he could call up his own portal and discern the light beyond it, and weeks more before he could open the way for more than a twinkling.

Wasselthorpe said it had seemed only natural, a term that caused Bandar to shudder. He explained its technical meaning among Institute scholars and found that his voice was trembling. He asked to be allowed

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a few moments to reflect upon what had happened. But Wasselthorpe was undeterred and wanted to know more.

So did his mentor. "If my young charge is no more than a skip and a jump from a serious bout of the hoo-hahs, I would appreciate knowing the warning signs."

"He is in no danger if he does not call up the vision of the door." Bandar looked sternly at Wasselthorpe and strongly urged him not to attempt the exercise again. Once into the Commons, he might never find a way out.

But still the young man said, "I would know more."

Again Bandar found the hard fixity of Wasselthorpe's gaze difficult to bear. He wondered that such an unnaturally concentrated mind had achieved only a third-tier degree, or that he should have come from an aristocracy that frequently showed the less fortunate effects of inbreeding.

"Then let it be later," said the noönaut. "I must think on the matter."

By "later," he meant, "never." But from what the two men said to each other after Bandar returned to his seat, it appeared that they were also bound for the *Orgulon*. He turned and gazed out at the landscape unrolling far beneath them as the old orange sun eased itself down to the horizon. He had been looking forward to the vast openness of the Swept. Now a cloud of foreboding seemed to have risen before him.

AT FARFLUNG, Bandar disembarked from the balloon-tram without speaking again to the two other passengers. He hurried through the terminal to find a ground car he could hire to take him to where the *Orgulon* docked. Frugality would ordinarily have inspired him to suggest that the three of them share transportation, but he wanted to put distance between himself and Wasselthorpe. The young man's unusual facility for entering the Commons disturbed him.

As the sun slipped behind the hills at whose feet stood Farflung, the car brought him to a stretch of docks. Beyond lay the Swept. The long grass that covered the flatlands to the far horizon rippled under a constant breeze like waves on a straw-colored sea. Bandar paused to look out at the immensity and the unsettled emotions that his encounter with

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Wasselthorpe had evoked now gave way to a feeling that he was where he was supposed to be. It was not a sense of contentment, rather it was a sentiment of being in the right place, doing the right thing. He drew in, then released a deep breath and strode toward the landship.

Close up, the *Orgulon* was enormous. The side that lay by the dock was a wall of lustrous wood, pierced by windows large and small, each bordered by polished metal. The vessel's body was a great oblong with rounded ends, resting on a network of shock-absorbing cylinders that connected it to an eight-axled chassis from which extended a score of huge rubber wheels. Bandar presented his invitation to a security officer who stood at the base of the gangplank that sloped up to an upper deck. She consulted a list and found his name, then gave him a searching look.

"The passengers are all traveling in pairs," she said, "one suffering from the lassitude and one to help the afflicted. Why are you alone?"

Bandar had prepared a story. "My brother has the disease but is too ill to travel. I came to evaluate the alleged cure."

She made a noncommittal noise and named a deck and cabin number. He went aboard and followed signs to his appointed quarters. There he stowed his bag before reposing upon the sleeping pallet and allowing its systems to restore his energies. After a while, he felt motion as the *Orgulon* left the dock and slowly moved out onto the Swept. A little later a steward tapped on his door and announced that the passengers were summoned to dinner.

The easiest route to the dining salon took Bandar across a spacious promenade deck that covered most of the landship's upper surface, except for raised platforms fore and aft on which stood the great vertical pylons whose rotating vanes stole from the ever-blowing wind the ship's motive power. He would have stopped to watch their operation and to look out across the prairie to where great cloud formations moved in the far distance like mobile mountains, but he noticed Abbas and Wasselthorpe near the railing to one side. The older man's appearance had altered — his face had taken on a different shape and his skin had noticeably darkened. Unconventionality was not uncommon among the aristocracy, Bandar knew. He wondered if the pair were competing in one of those odd contests that members of the upper strata indulged in as recreation, questing after some list of unlikely objects which might include a landship captain's cap.

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He decided that the two were, at least, strange, and resolved to stay clear of them.

Immediately below the promenade deck, the *Orgulon*'s dining area echoed the Swept in giving an impression of vast openness. It stretched from one side of the vessel to the other, its paneled walls broken by great round windows that looked out on the now night-shaded grasslands and its glistening wooden floor covered by large circular tables draped in snowy cloth and aglitter with crystal and cutlery. Bandar found that he was assigned to a certain seat and was relieved to discover that it was a good distance from Abbas and Wasselthorpe.

Others were already seated at his table and Bandar made appropriate gestures of head and hands to acknowledge them. They seemed a heterogeneous mix, varied in ages, social ranks and genders, their only commonality that they came in pairs and one member of each couple was in some stage of the lassitude.

Across from Bandar a large woman exercised unchallenged control of whatever conversation had preceded his arrival. She wore swathes of some frilled material, with a braided necklace of precious metal around her wattled neck and a thick scattering of blue-fire gems in her upswept white hair. Her tone bespoke a habit of being listened to. Her apparent spouse, a stocky fellow with neck and cheeks discolored by a dark birthmark, sat dull-eyed to her left. His face was frozen by the lassitude's paralysis but Bandar suspected that even in his prime he would seldom have dared to interrupt the ceaseless torrent of her opinions.

"We will see wonders," she declared as Bandar took his seat. "I am sure of it." She fixed the noönaut with a bellicose glare and continued, "You have the look of a skeptic. Don't trouble to deny it. I never err in my assessments of character. It is a gift."

"A gift you are clearly happy to share," Bandar said, "even with complete strangers who have demonstrated no desire to receive it."

"An aptitude for seeing the truth obliges one to speak it," the woman said. "I am Brond Halorn," she said. "This is my spouse, Bleban."

Bandar named himself.

"Why are you unaccompanied?"

He told her the tale of a brother.

"So there it is," she said, looking around the table. "He is indeed a

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skeptic, else he would have brought his poor brother along to receive Father Olwyn's blessing." She concluded her remark with a wave of a beringed hand that signified that all had turned out precisely as she had predicted. Bandar recognized a habitual gesture.

He defended himself. "I am no more skeptical than most," he said. "I can be convinced of the unlikely, even the seemingly impossible, though the proof need be unequivocal."

A motion of her hand indicated that his arguments were too vapid to merit an answer. This movement Bandar also took as part of her characteristic repertoire.

"You will see," she said, then resumed her address to the table in general. Bandar offered a gesture of his own, though he did so beneath the lip of the table, out of her line of sight. A few moments later, stewards began to bring in the first course: a jellied salad studded with morsels of fungus that had a unique flavor, like aromatic smoke. Bandar enjoyed the dish but the several more that followed were all built around the same unusual ingredient, and the taste began to cloy. A steward informed him that it was a delicacy called "truffles of the Swept."

When the last course was eaten and the servers were clearing away, Brond Halorn favored the table with more of her opinions. Bandar chose not to listen and instead ruminated on his plans to measure gravitational fluxes. But her voice and his thoughts were both soon interrupted by the sound of a gong that drew all attention to a dais at one end of the salon where a cone of light now shone down from the ceiling. A moment of expectation passed, then the beam of illumination filled with swirls of moving color that resolved into a projection of a slight man with a beatific expression.

The simulacrum introduced himself as Father Olwyn and welcomed the passengers. He announced a program that recommended study and action as the *Orgulon* traveled the Swept, preparing the travelers for a "ceremony of inculcation" leading to "a wondrous transformation."

Bandar sighed and lowered his eyes, placing the fingertips of one hand to the center of his brow. The fellow's discourse rang of a fraudster's patter. He looked away from the projected image, to find himself the object of a glare from Brond Halorn that would doubtless have wondrously transformed him into some species of small, squeaking vermin, had she

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but the power. He blinked and turned his gaze back to the simulacrum.

Father Olwyn's unseeing eyes were now raised to the ceiling and he was assuring the passengers that he knew what it was to suffer the lassitude; he had borne the affliction himself. After a suitably dramatic pause, he then announced, "But I was healed."

A great hush, that of an expectant crowd that dares not even breathe, filled the salon. Then the image said, "As *you* will be healed," and Bandar heard a mass sigh of released breath, and a low moan from Brond Halorn.

Olwyn finished by instructing the passengers in a four-syllable mantra — *fah, sey, opah* — that he assured them would "open the first door" in the process of healing. Bandar knew more than most about the effects of chants and mantras, and was confident that this one would do no more than exercise the jaws of those passengers, unaffected by the lassitude, who could still move theirs.

The room took up the chant. The white-haired woman's voice rose above the rest and her loud conviction drew her table mates — though not Bandar — into the sound. Their volume encouraged others and soon the mantra filled the room, accompanied by hands slapping tables and heels thudding against the floor.

Bandar looked about him and saw a wide range of emotions — hope, resignation, embarrassment, cynicism, fervor — as the passengers responded to the dynamics of their own psyches. He saw Phlevas Wasselthorpe regarding him with interest; then the young man's eyes moved away.

The chanting went on and on, and Bandar saw many whose eyes glazed and lost focus, though when he looked to Halorn he saw that she had been waiting for his gaze to come her way. She continued to chant "*fah, sey, opah*!" in an emphatic voice, while her hand made peremptory motions, palm up and fingers tight against each other, that summoned Bandar to join the chorus. He frowned, just as the projected Olwyn lifted his hands and cried, "Enough!"

Silence fell, broken only by Brond Halorn's throaty voice, edging on the hysterical, chanting the mantra twice more before a man seated to her right nudged her. Olwyn declared that he expected some of them to feel already the effect of the mantra, which he claimed would generate in them a numinous attribute he called "chuffe."

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"Yes!" said Brond Halorn, eyes afire. She could indeed feel chuffe rising within her.

Olwyn made some final remarks about the gravitational peculiarities of the Swept being conducive to the generating of chuffe and recommended more chanting and meditation. Then his image disappeared.

A hubbub of voices rose as the passengers responded as their natures dictated to the message and its bearer. At Bandar's table, Brond Halorn again took up the chant and a few others around the room did likewise. Bandar avoided her accusatory gaze by turning in his seat to survey the salon. Then someone shouted, "Look!" and he glanced about until he saw that all eyes in the room had been drawn to the table where Erenti Abbas and Phlevas Wasselthorpe sat.

But it was not the pair from the balloon-tram who were the object of the crowd's attention. Instead it was a slim young woman whose rigidity of expression argued that she was in the grip of the lassitude. She had risen to her feet, while her apparent companion, a ruddy-faced man with dark hair in a complex coiffure, looked up at her, astonished.

Her face was stiff with early-stage lassitude, but her slight body was quivering. She leaned forward, both hands on the tablecloth, looking down at the dark-haired man; then Bandar saw her mouth open as if to yawn. Her shivering stopped as she raised both hands to her cheeks and kneaded the muscles of her jaw.

"I can talk," she said.

Her companion rose and took her in his arms, his eyes glistening. They sat down together and held each other as the room filled with a rising tide of voices, one current of which was the chant of *fah, sey, opah*!

Bandar lost his view of the objects of all this attention as people rose to their feet, some standing on their chairs, to see what would happen next. Moments later, he heard the booming voice of a ship's officer restoring order. Stewards urged passengers to retake their seats, then produced a selection of liqueurs and essences.

Bandar chose a tincture of Red Abandon, a fiery liquor that had been a favorite in his long-ago days as an Institute undergraduate. He sipped it and avoided eye contact with anyone as the room settled. The circumstances were too pat, the timing highly suspect: the afflicted and those who cared for them had been presented with a meaningless mantra, then

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moments after it was chanted someone was visited by a miraculous cure. As a noönaut, he had seen at first hand the power of myth and supposition, and he had no doubt that he had just witnessed a contrived performance.

Now the dark-haired man was making some kind of speech that Bandar couldn't have heard, even if he'd cared to listen, because the white-haired virago across the table was chanting *fah, sey, opah* in a guttural undertone. Then the young woman's companion escorted her out of the salon through a passageway that led to the promenade deck.

Some of the passengers were enthused by what they had seen. Others expressed doubts. Bandar sipped his liqueur, then ordered another. He took no part in the debates that now broke out around him, though to himself he thought, *The sick should not be subjected to such hard-hearted shenanigans*. He did not know how Father Olwyn would gain from flim-flammery, but Bandar would have bet a month's emporium receipts that this entire expedition was aimed at transferring the contents of someone's coffers to someone else's.

"Well, skeptic," said the white-haired woman, "what do you make of that?"

Bandar's only answer was a slight lift and subsidence of one shoulder, which earned him a single syllable delivered in a harsh tone followed by Brond Halorn's observations, addressed to no one in particular, concerning rock-headedness and narrow-mindedness among those whose cerebral equipment was obviously not well connected to their visual apparatus. "They cannot see what they will not understand," she concluded.

Bandar was irked, and two Red Abandons had now done their work. "I saw and I understood all too well," he said. "Indeed, better than those who see only what they hope to see."

His show of resistance provoked a tirade of invective. When Bandar tried to correct her, his efforts were met with a renewed chant of *fah, sey, opah*, accompanied by rhythmic hand clapping. His glass empty, he turned away to seek a steward and while his third installment of Red Abandon was being poured, he saw Phlevas Wasselthorpe making his way among the tables. Bandar downed the liqueur in one gulp, and when his eyes stopped watering he noticed that the fellow was now quite near. Relieved of any trepidation by the effects of the drink, he rose and greeted

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him, but instead of answering, the young man gestured to his lips and jaw and made wordless sounds.

"You have the lassitude?" Bandar said and felt an inchoate urge to help the odd young fellow.

Wasselthorpe spread his hands in a fatalistic gesture. His mentor, Abbas, now joined them, and told Bandar that the disease was in its early stage. "It comes and goes."

Bandar offered his sympathy.

The young man grunted something that his older companion apparently understood. Abbas relayed the information to Bandar. "My young friend wonders if you would tell him more about the Commons. It has piqued his interest."

Bandar saw no reason not to. If Wasselthorpe was destined to be imprisoned in his own paralyzed flesh until released by an early death, it would be a kindness to show him the Commons, providing Bandar guided him only to its gentler Locations. He offered to meet them out on deck after he had changed his garments; Brond Halorn's manner of countering opposition had left his shirt front dampened by her saliva.

A short time later he joined them on the lighted promenade deck and they strolled toward the forecastle where the windvanes rotated. Abbas asked him what he thought of Father Olwyn's promises.

Bandar was blunt. "Even if I suffered from the lassitude, I would be deeply skeptical of any who claimed a mystic cure."

The conversation turned to the Commons. Now that the immediate effects of Red Abandon were fading, Bandar found himself divided about taking Wasselthorpe into the Commons. Either the young man possessed an uncanny ability to focus his mind or he was a latent psychotic. Bandar expressed his concerns in candid language. Erenti Abbas vouched for the young man's sanity and declared him to be a prodigy when it came to intensity of concentration.

Bandar acceded to the request. In his first years at the Institute, he had been counted a rare talent. Perhaps he was about to assist one who would become a renowned noönaut — if the lassitude didn't kill him. He led the pair to where the promenade deck met the raised forecastle. He had Wasselthorpe sit cross-legged, back against the bulkhead, hands folded in his lap. Bandar sat opposite him, knee to knee, the traditional teaching posture.

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The lassitude had stilled Wasselthorpe's lips and tongue but he could make pure notes. Bandar bade him close his eyes and voice the tones with him. "When the portal appears, tell me. I will talk you through it."

They began with the thran they had used on the balloon-tram. Scarcely more than a moment passed before Wasselthorpe grunted to show that he had achieved a vision of the door behind which shone a golden light. Bandar spoke softly, guiding him through the tones that opened the door, warning him to wait beyond the threshold.

Wasselthorpe sang the tones, pitch perfect, then grunted again. Bandar had to exert his maximum effort to form his own portal and open it. "Wait," he said, "for the light to fade. More important, allow me to catch up."

The young man had gone through like a fourth-level adept. Bandar sought for him in the glow and soon had a sense of his nearness. Here the lassitude did not affect Wasselthorpe's speech, and his voice came to the noönaut clearly. "Where am I?"

"Nowhere yet," said Bandar. "Just wait."

After a while, he asked Wasselthorpe, "Now where are you?"

The young man said he was in his boyhood home, looking out a window. Something about the scene outside disturbed him, so Bandar told him to think instead of the place where he had been most secure and happy. Wasselthorpe immediately announced that the scene had shifted to the room where he had spent much of his youth. When Bandar had him describe the setting, they soon found the anomaly: a dark mirror that should not have been in the back of the wardrobe. In its depths was a reflection that troubled the young man.

Bandar urged him not to fear his Shadow and to step boldly through it. Here was the moment when their expedition might easily have ended; it took discipline acquired through rigorous practice before most apprentice noönauts could face their own rejected attributes; some never could manage it and left the Institute for other pursuits. Yet it did not surprise Bandar that, moments later, Wasselthorpe announced he was through the mirror and descending a hillside path that led to a tarn of dark water.

"Go down the path," Bandar said, and when he reached the water, the noönaut told him to dive in. Then he hurried to descend his own staircase down to the road that led into the outer arrondisement of the Commons.

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He found an almost transparent, two-dimensional version of Wasselthorpe standing between the walls, looking about with wonder.

He wanted to know where he had come to. Bandar explained, then he touched Wasselthorpe's arm, performing a noönaut mentalism, and the young man's image solidified into three dimensions. Now they were linked for the duration of their stay in the Commons, so Bandar did not have to worry about losing him among the thousands of dreamers that invisibly surrounded them. He was shocked when the young man said that he was aware of others passing by, seeing them as motes of light in the corners of his vision. That was an ability that noönauts worked years to acquire.

Bandar thought it wise to remove themselves from the bare threshold of the Commons, so close to the prime arrondisement where the characteristic entities were to be found in their purest form. He was about to suggest that they visit one or two of the more benign Locations, but Wasselthorpe was now peering down the road, his virtual body slightly leaning in that direction as if pulled by magnetism. He said, "I wish to explore."

"A little, no more," Bandar said. "I grow concerned."

"But I am fine."

Bandar explained that before they had come here he had been willing to take Wasselthorpe for one of those rarities with unusually biddable memories who find it easy to enter the Commons. But now he did not know what to think. Wasselthorpe was apparently not a natural, yet he could effortlessly detect the presence of the dreamers around them when even Bandar must work to catch a glimmer.

Wasselthorpe said, "I feel no fear. I am where I should be."

The phrase troubled Bandar. "As if you were called here?" he said.

"Yes," Wasselthorpe said.

"We should go back," Bandar said.

The young man looked around. "Are we in danger?"

"Not I," said Bandar, "but you may be in great danger."

But Wasselthorpe perceived no threat. "Why should we return?"

"To see if you can," Bandar said. To be called into the Commons presupposed an entity that did the calling, a powerful archetype that Wasselthorpe, lacking an arsenal of thrans and mentalist techniques, could not withstand.

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"I sense no ill intent here," Wasselthorpe said. He begged to be allowed at least to look about and promised that at the first sign of danger, Bandar could lead him back.

Perhaps it was the lingering confidence of Red Abandon, but Bandar acceded, at which point Wasselthorpe said, "I have an inclination to go down the road," adding, when Bandar let his anxiety show, "It is only a mild inclination."

"In the Commons, nothing is 'only' anything," Bandar said.

"What could happen?"

"I cannot name any of the particular menaces because to name is to summon."

Wasselthorpe found the concept hard to encompass.

"It is not a laughing matter," said Bandar. "Naturals who find their way into the Commons almost never find their way out. The unprotected consciousness is soon absorbed by a pure archetype."

Apprentice noönauts, hearing of these things, always showed some degree of fear. Yet Wasselthorpe displayed no concern and Bandar felt a rising curiosity about this odd young man.

He offered a bargain: they would go down the road together, but Bandar's commands must be instantly heeded. Wasselthorpe agreed and made to set off, but Bandar delayed their going to teach the young man the strongest of the thrans: the three, three, and seven, whose tones would hide them from the characteristic entities. He bade the young man sing it loudly and without cease, then linked his arm in Wasselthorpe's and led him down the road.

They soon reached the divide that separated the threshold from the first level of the Commons. Because Bandar was conducting the journey, it presented as an old stone bridge across a black river. On the other side was an open space in which the "usual suspects" sat or stood or milled about.

Bandar was surprised to note that near the far end of the bridge sat the Hero. His Helper, as always, was nearby. That the Hero appeared in such proximity meant that that archetype must be the entity whose influence was most dominant in Wasselthorpe's personality. *Odd*, he thought, *I would have predicted the Fool for naivete and the Seeker for his exaggerated interest in unraveling mysteries*. The Fool was indeed nearby, but

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although the Seeker was Bandar's own dominant archetype, it was wandering far back in the crowd.

They had meanwhile reached the middle of the bridge. Bandar, his arm still linked with Wasselthorpe's, sought to restrain his further progress. The young man continued to chant the thran but his face was taut. He pulled against Bandar's grip.

Now a curious thing happened: the Hero's head came up as if something had attracted its attention. The Helper, too, showed increased alertness. Bandar saw that many of the other archetypes had stopped their characteristic activities and had turned toward the bridge.

That shouldn't happen, was his first thought. To Wasselthorpe, he said, "Louder."

The young man increased his volume but still his body seemed to yearn toward the archetypes.

"This is wrong," Bandar said, "as if they sense us."

The Hero had turned to face them, even though the insulating thran should have denied it any perception of their presence. Now it took a step toward them. The Helper followed, as did some of the other entities, including the Wise Man. The Father left the Mother and Child and moved toward the bridge.

Wasselthorpe was still chanting, but his volume had decreased. Bandar hauled on his arm, trying to pull him back. But he felt the young man's virtual flesh resisting with unexpected strength.

Bandar now added his voice to the thran. The Hero stopped and stood still, its head turning this way and that as if listening for an elusive sound. The other entities also paused.

The noönaut had, with difficulty, returned Wasselthorpe to the top of the arched span. Now the young man exerted himself and would go no farther back. Worse, he stopped chanting the thran to half-turn toward Bandar and say, "Wait!"

Bandar recognized the look on Wasselthorpe's face; it was the "wild surmise" that gripped apprentice noönauts when they first felt a resonance between their own psyches and the pure entities that blended within them to make them who they were. It was not a look he wanted to see on the face of an uninstructed beginner.

"Listen," the young man said.

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Listening was the last thing Bandar intended. He chanted more loudly, almost straining the throat of his virtual body. He dragged at Wasselthorpe's arm with both hands but could not budge the resisting young man.

A frisson of horror went through the noönaut as he saw the Hero step forward again. It set the heel of one boot onto the stones of the bridge. *Impossible!* thought Bandar. *It can't do that!*

The stones of the bridge moved beneath his feet, grating against each other. Wasselthorpe stood as if entranced. The Hero raised its foot to take another step. Bandar had no doubt that the entity was somehow aware of them, despite the thran, that it was drawn to them by an attraction so powerful that it could suppress the elemental forces that separated Locations in the Commons.

He yanked on Wasselthorpe's arm, spinning the young man around to face him. He could not speak while intoning the thran, but he let his terror show in his face and raised one hand in a gesture that said, *What are you waiting for?*

To his great relief, he saw understanding dawn. Wasselthorpe rejoined him in chanting the thran. The Hero's second foot did not step onto the bridge.

Bandar signaled Wasselthorpe to sing louder and when the young man did as he was bid, Bandar pulled him back to the road that was the threshold of the noösphere. Without delay, he sang the tones that opened an emergency gate and thrust Wasselthorpe through the rift the moment it appeared. Moments later, Bandar came back to the deck of the *Orgulon*. He leaped to his feet and leaned over the still-seated form of the young man, shaking his shoulders until the eyes opened and focused on him.

Wasselthorpe mumbled something and Bandar sat down again. "I believe he is all right."

"He has also regained the power of speech," said a female voice. The security officer was standing over them.

Abbas explained about Wasselthorpe's intermittent bouts of rigor. The woman showed a professional's unwillingness to accept second-hand testimony. She squatted before Wasselthorpe and said, "What happened?"

The young man was still dazed. Bandar stepped in. "We encountered an archetype," he said. "More significant, it encountered us."

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"A man with a sword. His helmet had wings," said Wasselthorpe, his gaze turned inward.

Bandar found the detail interesting. "That's one of its earliest forms."

Wasselthorpe added more specifics of his view of the entity. He had seen a dawn-time barbarian wearing chain mail and the skin of an extinct canine predator. Then he lapsed back into introspection.

The security officer glowered. "What have you done to him?"

"Nothing," said Bandar. He gave a short explanation of what had happened on the lip of the prime arrondisement. "But he is fine."

The security officer expressed surprise and distaste that anyone would venture into such a hell for a pastime. Bandar assured her he had no intention of accompanying Wasselthorpe into the Commons again.

She seemed to want to take the discussion further and Bandar was conscious of not having made a good impression. But her next words were never uttered because there came a panicked scream from the darkness that shrouded the foredeck.

THE ENSUING few minutes were full of shouts and action. It appeared that a passenger — indeed it was the dark-haired man whose female companion had been miraculously cured of the lassitude — had fallen from the foredeck. The landship's great wheels had crushed him. The captain, a small, precise man, came on deck and ordered the vessel stopped, then dispatched a flying gig to retrieve the corpse. The security officer held a whispered consultation with the captain, who then announced that the passenger's death might have involved a criminal offense. The slim young woman became hysterical. Protesting that it had been an accident, she was led below by the security officer.

The passengers had crowded around in the way that bystanders at horrific events often do. Bandar sought solitude by the landship's rail and reflected on what had transpired in the Commons. He was deeply troubled by the Hero's seeming awareness of them despite the thran, and especially its determination to come for them directly across the bridge. That should have been impossible.

When he refocused his powerful memory on the events, he was struck by a detail that had eluded him at the time. While the Hero had blindly

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sought Wasselthorpe, Bandar now realized that the Helper had not just been following its master. Its eyes had not lacked focus, nor were they directed at Wasselthorpe. They had been aimed straight at Guth Bandar. *It sensed me,* he thought. *Thran or no thran, it knew I was there.*

It was a worrisome thought. Bandar did not care to be absorbed and tipped into permanent psychosis. But even if he were willing to go mad, his choice would not have been the Helper, insanely serving some blustering hero. He shuddered and knew that he was not just responding to the chill breeze off the night prairie.

Abbas and Wasselthorpe joined him after the body had been removed and the crowd cleared. They speculated on how the poor fellow might have come to fall overboard. Bandar offered the opinion that the landship might have encountered a transient gravitational cyst, causing the man to unbalance and tumble over the rail. The conversation reminded him that it was just such anomalies he had come to investigate, and he excused himself, then hurried below to fetch his measuring equipment. But when he came back on deck and activated his device, he detected nothing out of the ordinary.

The security officer approached him as he adjusted settings and calibrated norms. "Now what are you up to?" she wanted to know.

Bandar told her. His explanation earned him a look that let him know that he was becoming one of her least favorite passengers. Deciding it would be best to retire, he pocketed his equipment and went to his cabin.

It had been a tiring day, so Bandar decided to combine his concern about Wasselthorpe and the Hero with his need for rest. He fell asleep, allowed himself to slip into a dream, then took control. He transported himself to the threshold and set off for the prime arrondisement with the intention of examining the bridge and the archetypes — especially the Hero and Helper — beyond the barrier.

He had scarcely taken three strides, however, before he felt a grip on his shoulder that sent a cold shock through his virtual torso. Startled, he turned to see what had accosted him and found himself looking up into the pleased face of Phlevas Wasselthorpe.

"What are you doing?" Bandar said.

"I am dreaming."

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"This is very wrong," said the noönaut. "You should not be here."

The young man counseled him to be unconcerned. "It is only a dream."

"Yes," said Bandar, "but it is *my* dream."

"No, it is mine," said the other. "You are a figment."

"Tell me," Bandar said, "when you look at me, do I seem to change in any way? Or is my form constant?"

The other looked him up and down. "It is peculiar, but you do seem to remain unchanged, whereas the woods behind you have been several different kinds of forest."

"What does that tell you?"

"What should it tell me?"

"A hundred things, none of them good. I will open us a gate." Bandar sounded the first few notes of the emergency exit thran. He was astonished to find himself silenced. Wasselthorpe had placed a hand over Bandar's mouth. The hand felt very real.

This time the shock of contact was strongly colored by a bolt of fear. Bandar struggled and with a great effort managed to wrench himself free. He backed away, saying, "Oh, this is much worse than not good. I should appear to you as at best a shifting image. Instead you not only see me but can lay hands on me and prevent my following my own will."

"I am sorry," said Wasselthorpe. "I do not want to depart."

"I want nothing but," said Bandar. "Do you not understand that you frighten me?"

"I do not wish to." The young man looked around at the shifting landscape. "Do you not sense that somehow all of this is as it is meant to be?"

That was precisely what frightened Bandar. "Neither of us is experiencing an ordinary dream," he said. "Some force is shaping us to its own ends. In the Commons, the only such force is an archetype intent on absorbing a consciousness. That way lies madness."

"I do not feel irrational," said Wasselthorpe. "My mind seems unusually clear, considering that I am dreaming."

"Again, a worrying sign," said Bandar. "My sense of things tells me that you are being drawn into the role of Hero and that I am being pressed into the part of the Helper."

"I want from you only advice," Wasselthorpe said.

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"Let us be exact," said Bandar. "You feel compelled to enter more deeply into the Commons and you want me to be your guide."

"I suppose."

"I refuse."

"Why?"

"Because the end of this is your absorption into the entity that summons you, followed by insanity and certain death. And poor Bandar, towed along helpless in your train, suffers a comparable doom."

Wasselthorpe found the warning hard to believe. "All will be well," he said. "I am certain of it."

Bandar informed him that that was always the Hero's sure belief, right up until the moment the dragon's teeth closed upon his tender parts.

Now Wasselthorpe disputed the contention that he was ruled by the Hero. "Why can I not be a blend of several archetypical entities, like you and anyone else?"

Bandar told him to look at himself.

The young man looked down and Bandar saw mild surprise take possession of his face. Wasselthorpe was clad in chain mail, scuffed boots, and rough trousers bound up by criss-crossing straps. A shaggy gray pelt covered his shoulders, its paws tied across his chest. In one hand was a sword of iron. Bandar gestured and Wasselthorpe raised a hand and touched the wings that sprouted from the helmet on his head.

"Does that seem familiar?"

The young man had to admit that it did. Yet, he was as thoroughly unconcerned as a Hero would be.

Bandar suggested that he ought to open a gate so they could discuss the situation in the waking world, where it was easier to resist an inclination to madness. He was chagrined to see the other's face fill with heroic resolve.

"No," Wasselthorpe said. He was here to do something, and felt that he must do it.

Bandar had backed a little farther away; Wasselthorpe was accompanying his declaration with sweeping gestures, and only now noticed that he was doing so with the hand that held a sword. Considerately, he laid the weapon down on the road. Instantly, it disappeared from there and reappeared in his grasp.

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"What do you think the 'something' you are here to do might be?" Bandar said.

The other spoke without reflection. "I must search."

"Search for what? Something nice, like treasure? Or something with fangs and an insatiable appetite?"

A blank look came over Wasselthorpe. He did not know, he said, but he would know it when he saw it.

"Oh, my." Bandar put his hands over his eyes and shook his head. "All right," he said. It did no good to argue with a Hero. But he begged to be allowed to shape the adventure. That way they stood some chance of surviving it.

The young man agreed to follow his advice.

The noönaut said, "Look around and tell me if there is anything that draws your attention."

Wasselthorpe immediately found that something about the woods beyond the field interested him.

"Very well," said Bandar, "let us approach them. But I must lead."

Wasselthorpe agreed.

"All right," said the noönaut, though the situation was far from it, and asked the young man to indicate the direction in which he wanted to travel. Wasselthorpe closed his eyes and let his sword hand rise to point the way. When the noönaut asked how far he thought they should go, the answer was, "Not far."

Bandar turned the globe and regarded the proposed line of travel. A short distance away was the entrance to a Class Three Event. "Curious," he said. He put away the globe. He would have liked to call an end to the expedition here and now so that he could mull the coincidence: here they were traveling the Swept, a legacy of the War Against the Dree, and now a strange young man who was powerfully influenced by the Hero had a strong urge to enter the Event that the war had carved out in the Commons.

"Just a coincidence?" Wasselthorpe suggested.

Of course it was a coincidence, Bandar said, and that worried him even more. In the waking world a coincidence was just a random juxtaposition of events, devoid of meaning. But in the Commons, coincidence was the most meaningful circumstance of all, the immensely potent force that

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tied one thing to another. "Indeed," he said, "it is coincidence that connects everything to everything else."

Wasselthorpe's reaction troubled him further. The young man ought to be afraid, yet he was not. He pointed the sword once more. "I must go there," he said. "Does it mean I will die?"

Bandar did not think so. The choice of that particular Event was less worrisome than many another he might have chosen. But he warned again that Wasselthorpe must let him be their guide.

"I will."

The noönaut took a firm grip on the young man's sword arm. He taught Wasselthorpe a thran and when the rendition was perfect, Bandar cautioned him to continue the chant. It would keep the Location's idiomats from detecting their presence and reacting to them as if they were part of the Event.

"How bad would that be?"

"The Dree were appalling," Bandar said, "and the war to resist them was particularly horrid." The invaders had been a hive species, each hive telepathically and pheromonically connected among all its members into one entity. They used their concentrated mental powers to enslave other species and force them to work and fight for the hive — especially the latter, because ritual combat was the basis of what passed for culture among the Dree. Status among the competing hives was everything, and status was gained and held by a hive's success on the battlefield.

Dree fighting style was mainly devoted to capturing prisoners that could be carried back to the captor's hive and tortured. The telepathic Dree relished the anguish, fear, and despair of their victims, just as humans savored the flavors and textures of foods and essences. Fortunately, this strategic imperative meant that all their battle tactics centered on surrounding small groups of enemies for capture. Faced with a well-organized army determined to massacre them, the Dree were heavily outclassed.

After the initial surprise of the invasion, the Dree were soon rolled up and confined to the territory now known as the Swept. No one wanted to dig them out of their warren of tunnels, so the gravitational aggregator was brought down from space to crush and bury the invaders, along with their unfortunate mind-slaves, beneath the flattened landscape.

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Wasselthorpe appeared to be affected by the tale. "Are you sure you want to go on with this?" Bandar asked.

"I am somehow called to go this way," the young man said. "I must see what there is to see."

Bandar was still weighing his curiosity against his apprehension, though it could do no harm to visit the Event. But he reminded Wasselthorpe not to break off the chant. If either needed to speak, he would use hand signals to warn the other to increase the volume of the thran to keep them both covered.

He led them to the node, opened the gate, and led them through. They stepped into open land beneath a sky splashed with stars. A wind whispered through tall trees and a stream chuckled not far away. Bandar took quick stock of the scene: they were near the base of a long slope leading out onto flat land where armored war vehicles and assault infantry were converging on the range of hills behind them where the Dree had consolidated their forces. He could hear the clicking and creaking of Dree warriors.

The sound must have piqued Wasselthorpe's interest because he abruptly ceased chanting. At once, a concentrated beam of energy lit up the area with green light and the ground at their feet bubbled and smoked. Bandar raised his voice and yanked at the young man's arm, bringing him back to an appreciation of where they were.

They waited briefly until the armored assault had passed them by, then moved downslope and across the stream into a pasture. The hemming was almost complete, and Bandar saw the massive aggregator above the horizon, blotting out the stars.

Bandar motioned Wasselthorpe to increase his volume again and asked: did he feel any impulse to go this way or that? The fellow looked about him and his attention was caught by something a little way off and he moved toward it. Bandar followed and found a shallow trench that contained the melted remains of some heavy weapon and four carbonized Dree.

Wasselthorpe stepped down into the declivity and pried the corpses apart with his sword, revealing the intact upper half of one of the invaders. The young man stared at the dead thing until Bandar gestured for him to increase his volume again so the noönaut could speak.

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"No eyes," he said, looking down at the rounded oblong of brown chitin that was something like a head. It had feathery antennae that, in life, stood upright to detect odor with fine precision. Nerve-rich regions on the torso and head detected vibration and rendered it as sound. At close range it could also detect bioelectrical fields.

Wasselthorpe regarded the dead Dree without reaction. Bandar questioned him and learned that the young man felt no more urges. Apparently they had done whatever Wasselthorpe's motivating entity wanted done. The noönaut examined the other man closely and was interested to see the trappings of the Hero fade, leaving the young man clad in unremarkable attire.

He considered summoning an emergency exit again, but departing from the Commons by that route twice in one day could cause disorientation even to the experienced traveler. Instead, he brought out his map and navigated a path through a series of innocuous Locations where they would not even need to hide behind thrans. A short while later, he was able to ease Wasselthorpe through a conduit that would lead him back into normal sleep.

But Bandar did not then wake himself. Nor did he return to the mission Wasselthorpe's arrival had interrupted. There was no point going to the bridge to study the usual suspects. He had had a good close-up look at the pure archetype that was governing the strange young man. The noönaut wanted to think about what he had seen and so he made his way to a quiet Landscape that consisted of little more than a tiny patch of sand-colored rock, set in an endless ocean and shaded by a single Sincere/Approximate palm tree. No idiomat ever came there, and Bandar had often wondered what role the simple setting could have played in human history.

But he did not pursue that idle chain of thought now. He wanted to reflect on the unprecedented sequence of events that had occurred since he had introduced Phlevas Wasselthorpe to the Commons. First, the young man had demonstrated an unheard-of ability to enter the noösphere. Bandar had studied naturals who could slip easily into the noösphere, but they did so at the sacrifice of their own identities. They became the archetypes that summoned them, disappearing into them so utterly that they no longer had any individual consciousness: there was only an

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archetype psychotically stalking the waking world, usually dealing out misery and horror until the authorities intervened.

But Wasselthorpe had gone in and come out unaffected, as if he merely stepped from one room to another. More shocking still, he had been able to enter Guth Bandar's dream and physically dominate the noönaut's virtual flesh. Most disturbing of all, the young man's consciousness had clearly made a connection with the Hero, yet he had not been absorbed by it. Wasselthorpe's accomplishments represented two highly unlikely results and one that was simply impossible. There had never been, to Bandar's expert knowledge, anyone remotely like him.

Another worrisome thought occurred as Bandar sat beneath the palm tree. The Hero never went anywhere without the Helper. Bandar had played that role, indeed had slipped into it so readily that it was as if he had himself been suborned by that characteristic entity. Yet here was Bandar, thinking rational thoughts, when he should have been drowned in the soup of psychosis.

A half-fashioned memory nudged at the edge of his awareness. He reached for it with a noönaut's casual skill but was disturbed to feel it somehow slip away. He sought for it in earnest, focusing a great deal of his trained power, yet still it eluded him. Another attempted grasp, and then it was gone.

The experience left Bandar troubled. It was bad enough that something impossible was going on inside Phlevas Wasselthorpe. But for a lifelong adept of the noösphere to find that elements of his own psyche could deftly avoid his grip brought the strangeness far too close to the essential core of Guth Bandar. Something was going on within him that he was unable to bring to the surface of his mind. To a noönaut, such a state of affairs must be deeply troubling.

He awakened himself and made his way to the cabin Wasselthorpe shared with Erenti Abbas. He knocked and was admitted by the young man. Bandar inspected him and was satisfied he had sustained no harm from his experiences of the night.

Wasselthorpe apologized for having overborne Bandar's objections to the mission he had felt compelled to fulfill and for forcing Bandar to guide him.

Bandar waved away the sentiment. The events were over and he had no intention of repeating them.

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Now Wasselthorpe was wondering if he might someday take up the exploration of the noösphere. He even asked if he might study under Bandar.

The noönaut felt the skin of his face cool and knew he must have gone pale. He informed Wasselthorpe that it would be kinder if he simply killed Bandar on the spot. "Be assured, I will never again go willingly with you into the Commons."

Indeed, he meant to ask the *Orgulon*'s captain for the use of his gig to take him away forthwith so that he could never be pressed into the Hero's service again.

"But what of your research?" Wasselthorpe asked.

Bandar told him that he could take scant pleasure in it while constantly at risk of being dragooned to his death.

The danger seemed remote to Wasselthorpe.

"To me," said Bandar, "it is inescapable. I am in grave peril if I remain within range of you, and since I do not know what that range is, I shall set the greatest possible distance between us."

He ended with a mollifying gesture and assured Wasselthorpe that he meant no offense.

The young man said none had been taken. The matter mystified him.

Bandar looked up into the young fellow's mildly troubled face and again felt an urge to be of assistance to him. He fought it down and went in search of the captain. That interview was not a success: the captain called in the security officer, whose name Bandar now learned was Raina Haj, and she refused to let anyone leave the ship until the questions regarding the death of the passenger were cleared up.

"It was no accident," she said.

"But how can I be a suspect?" he protested. "I had just emerged from a trance and was under your direct view when it happened."

"Perhaps you were there to distract me," Haj said.

Breakfast had been served and eaten by the time Bandar entered the dining salon. Apparently, Father Olwyn had also come and gone again, leaving the lassitude sufferers and their companions with a new mantra — *bom, ala, bom* — that would further elevate their chuffe. Brond Halorn, her hair still asparkle with blue-fire gems, was leading the most fervent

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group of chanters. When she saw Bandar enter and make his way to the remains of the buffet, she threw a challenging stare his way.

Bandar declined to return her gaze and looked for an empty seat away from her devoted chorus. The only available spaces were within too close a range to Abbas and Wasselthorpe; it would be rude to sit near them without speaking to them. He filled a plate with items from the chafing dishes — all, it turned out, featured variant renderings of the truffles of the Swept — and took it along with a steaming pot of punge back to his cabin.

He slept for a while, allowing himself an ordinary dream cycle, and awoke feeling refreshed and more cheerful. He went on deck where he found the security officer. Again he offered reasoned arguments; again they were rebuffed.

"It is not some mere whim that prompts me to seek to depart," he said. "My psyche is in danger as long as I am in proximity to that young man." He unobtrusively indicated Abbas and Wasselthorpe, who were standing by the rail.

An even deeper suspicion crept into Haj's already dubious expression. "What exactly is your relationship to those two?" she said.

"I have no relationship. I encountered them on the balloon-tram on the way here."

"Do you often encounter strangers who threaten your sanity?"

"No, but there is something odd about Wasselthorpe. He is able to do things he should not be capable of."

The security officer tilted her head to regard Bandar. "Both you and they stand out from the rest of the passengers," she said. "You arrived claiming a lassitude-affected brother. His illness comes and goes."

"I am in danger. Last night Wasselthorpe invaded my dream."

Haj's skepticism visibly intensified. "Uh huh," she said.

Bandar concluded there was no point in further argument. He went below and sat in his cabin until boredom made him take up his measurement equipment and go back on deck. If he could not escape, he might as well do something useful.

He was taking readings from various points of the compass when Wasselthorpe approached him.

"I have been thinking about what happened last night," the young man said.

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"I do not wish to be impolite," said Bandar, squinting at a read-out, "but I must refuse to discuss the matter with you. I would not still be here but Raina Haj will not let me depart."

"I am sorry you are troubled," the other said. "For myself, I feel as if a door has opened on a world whose existence I'd never heard of. Yet I grow increasingly sure that there is something for me there."

"A destiny, perhaps?" said Bandar.

Wasselthorpe's normally serious expression broke under a sudden surge of excitement. "Yes, exactly! A destiny!"

"You cannot imagine how frightening that is," said Bandar. "I do not know what you are or how you can do what you do. But such abilities, yoked to a sense of destiny, then coupled to the power to draw me, of all people, helplessly into your wake, are enough to give me the abdabs."

"I sense no harm in my fascination."

Bandar sighed. "Of course you don't. But the Commons is full of surprises, many of them hideously final." He begged the young man to let him be and told him that he resolved to sleep at odd times so that his dreams might be unviolated, and asked Wasselthorpe not to meddle with any other dreamers he might encounter in his sleep.

The day wore on. Bandar would again have taken dinner in his cabin, but when he summoned a steward the fellow told him that Raina Haj had decreed that all passengers must dine together. Apparently the security officer had installed surveillance systems in the salon that could read and assess subliminal reactions among the passengers. She hoped some investigatory leads would develop from throwing them all together.

Bandar decided he would demonstrate that he had no ties to Abbas and Wasselthorpe by dining at their table and making no attempt to hide his face. Two seats had been left empty — the dead man's and his companion's, who was confined to her quarters under guard. The ship's first officer, who had sat there the previous night, was also missing, so that Bandar, Wasselthorpe and Abbas were joined only by a retired couple from the Isle of Cyc, who were introduced as Ule Gazz and her spouse, Olleg Ebersol. He was paralyzed by the lassitude, while her face showed enough animation for both of them. They were enthusiasts of the Lho-tso school of practical enlightenment and she spoke glowingly of mantras and rising chuffe and the cure she expected. Ebersol's opinions on these matters were

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impossible to determine but Bandar saw genuine suffering in the man's eyes.

The cuisine was again entirely built around truffles — Bandar wondered if the cruise might be some ploy to market the fungus, though how the lassitude and truffles might commercially intersect was beyond him. After the meal, Father Olwyn again appeared in simulacrum and offered a sermon that Bandar found all too vague, along with an exhortation for all to chant *bom, bom ala bom.*

The chant rose throughout the room as Olwyn disappeared. Bandar dismissed the sermon as, "A pile of piety and platitudes," at which Ule Gazz took offense. The couple went to the other side of the salon, where Brond Halorn was vigorously conducting more than half the passengers in a mass chant. The slap of dozens of hands on tables and feet on floorboards shook the room.

Phlevas Wasselthorpe once more tried to draw Bandar into a discussion of their mutual experience in the Commons. Bandar again had to fight down an initial urge to help the young man, but he transformed the impulse into a brief lecture: "For your own good, don't go there. And if you find yourself wandering the Commons, please do not seek my company."

He extracted a promise that Wasselthorpe would not sleep until later in the evening, then retired to his cabin to snatch as much rest as he could before their dreams might again overlap. He dreamt lucidly and the moment his noönaut's senses detected the presence of Wasselthorpe in the Commons, he promptly woke himself and spent the rest of the night in meditation.

WITH THE TIRED old sun barely creeping above the horizon, the passengers were summoned to breakfast. Bandar had had enough of the truffles of the Swept — the flavor, though rich, soon cloyed. He took plain cakes and punge and carried them again to the table where Abbas and Wasselthorpe sat, tendered the basic formalities, then ate without offering conversation.

As he was finishing his second mug of punge Bandar noted that the landship was slowing. The other two men did likewise and turned in their seats to peer out of one of the great round windows. Something attracted

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their attention and Bandar rose to look over their shoulders. For the first time since he had boarded the *Orgulon* he experienced a thrill of pleasure.

"Those are Rover carts," he said.

The landship came to a halt near a place where a wide circle of the long grass had been trampled flat. Gangplanks extended themselves and the passengers debarked, the lassitude sufferers in whom the disease was most advanced being transported on come-alongs, small platforms fitted with gravity obviators and normally used to tow heavy baggage.

Bandar came down onto the Swept, looking about avidly. The projector that allowed Father Olwyn to address the passengers was deployed and he heard some more blather about chuffe and mantras. But the noönaut's attention was drawn to the Rovers and their vehicles. Seven of the lightweight, high-wheeled carts were spread around the rim of the flattened area. Made of plaited bamboo withes, each rode on two tall metal-and-rubber wheels, thin-spoked and fat-tired. Bamboo ribs curved from one side to the other, surmounted by a canopy of tightly woven grass to shade passengers from sun and rain.

Each cart was drawn by a team of eight shuggras, round-eared, sharp-incisored, oversized rodents bred up long ago from vermin. Their legs were long and powerful, ending in splayed hairless feet with spoon-shaped leathery digits. At the moment they crouched, resting but keeping up a constant muttering.

Wasselthorpe also seemed to lack interest in Olwyn's sermonizing. He was clearly curious about the Rovers and drifted in the direction of the nearest team. Bandar felt a strong impulse to warn him away. Shuggras were intensely social, but only amongst themselves; any creature outside their own clan or their Rover master's family might suffer an unprovoked attack.

The Rovers had been lying beneath the carts until the passengers came down from the *Orgulon*. Now they emerged and each went to his vehicle and pulled down a tailboard that unfolded into steps.

Wasselthorpe was clearly surprised by the Rovers' nonhuman appearance. He asked Bandar if they were of ultraterrene origin. Now it was Bandar's turn to be surprised: even a provincial lordling ought to have heard of Rovers. They had been sharing the planet with humans for eons. The noönaut wondered about the young man's education. Much commonplace knowledge seemed to have eluded him.

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His plump mentor made a remark that revealed his unhappiness about exchanging the landship's comforts for the more austere conditions of a Rover cart. Still, Abbas assumed a look of resignation and steered Wasselthorpe toward one of the vehicles. The young man was staring at the nearest Rover, a mature male who was showing his species' usual discomfort at direct eye contact. Bandar stepped up beside Wasselthorpe and advised him to try a less direct inspection. He also briefly summarized the creatures' origins.

"They are dogs?" Wasselthorpe said.

"That is not a word they like to hear," Abbas said. They climbed into the cart, making its leather springs creak. On each side of the interior, four seats of woven wicker faced forward. Erenti Abbas expressed some relief that the seats were cushioned by pads of woven grass. He and Wasselthorpe took the foremost pair and Bandar sat behind the young man. The cart squeaked and bounced again as Ule Gazz and Olleg Ebersol boarded, the former helping her spouse into a seat behind Bandar. Despite the efforts they had made to elevate their chuffe, Bandar thought that Ebersol showed signs of sinking deeper into the lassitude.

Two more passengers climbed in, a pair of sturdy young women who had the look of students. Bandar had seen them on the *Orgulon* but had not met them. The new arrivals named themselves as Corje Sooke and Pollus Ermatage, though in fact Ermatage did all the speaking, Sooke having been rendered mute by the disease. They identified themselves as cohorts, a lifelong relationship of intense closeness practiced by citizens of the county of Fasfallia.

The remaining seat was soon filled by the slim young woman whose companion had been crushed beneath the landship. She was escorted to the cart by Raina Haj, demanding all the way to be allowed to leave and return home. Haj said something to her that Bandar didn't catch but which clearly did not please its hearer. She flung herself onto the seat cushion, crossed her arms and glowered at all of them before turning to glare at the Swept.

Bandar overheard Abbas and Wasselthorpe discussing the new arrival — he learned that her name was Flix — but their low voiced conversation was interrupted by their Rover's securing of the cart's tailboard, accompanied by a yelp that Bandar knew meant "Important information follows."

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"Yaffak I am called," the Rover said in his species' odd way of speaking, that always sounded to Bandar like a modified howl. Seeing incomprehension on the faces of the other passengers, the noönaut translated the statement for them.

Yaffak went around to the front of the cart and leaped into the driver's uncovered seat. He seized the reins and flourished a whip, and in a moment eight whining shuggras pressed powerful shoulders against the padded harness. The cart jerked forward but settled into a smooth passage across the unnaturally level ground. They picked up speed, racing straight into the sunrise, leaving a cart-wide track through the long grass.

Bandar watched the other carts with interest. He had learned from his studies that Rovers were intensely competitive, with a strong instinct for hierarchy. A pack of Rovers driving their carts across the Swept should be, he thought, a kind of race, each driver struggling to be the leader. He was disappointed, therefore, to see the carts take up a line-abreast formation.

"I don't understand," he said.

"Don't understand what?" said Erenti Abbas.

Bandar explained about the Rovers' supposed competitive spirit. That brought a dismissal of the usefulness of competition from Ule Gazz. She extolled the Lho-tso philosophy of fatalism.

Erenti Abbas engaged her from an epicurean's point of view, using his enjoyment of food as a metaphor for seizing pleasure from the passing transience of life. Then Pollus Ermatage weighed in with an observation that, from the perspective of manure, the whole cycle of fertilization, growth, harvest, processing, and consumption was just a complex way of producing fresh manure.

It was the kind of discussion Bandar remembered from his early years at the Institute, when undergraduates would sit around a tavern table and regale each other with beery perspectives on the meaning of life. Now he offered the view that some things were effectively eternal, and cited the noösphere as an example of permanence, whereas individual human lives tended to be repetitions of generic themes, with minor embellishments.

Wasselthorpe protested that his life was not a trivium. No one had ever been him, doing what he was doing, in the way he was doing it, and for the reasons that moved him.

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Viewed from within that life, Bandar replied, all that was indubitably correct. But from a wider scope, whatever the shape of Wasselthorpe's life might be, it differed only marginally from those of the billions upon billions of young men who had come before him.

"What is your quest: power, passion, riches, spiritual insight? Each has been looked for and found — or not found — countless times. At best you might add some slight variation to the grand scheme. But the effort is ultimately no more important than to have shifted one grain of a desert's sand."

Bandar saw forlorn sadness wash across the young man's face. There was pain somewhere in his history, pain and loss. And Bandar's glib words had somehow evoked a memory of it. Now something else stirred in the back of the noönaut's mind: a vague sense that what he had said to Phlevas Wasselthorpe was completely untrue; that this young man's quest might be more than a minor variation on a theme.

It is fatigue, Bandar told himself. *I have not slept well. And perhaps a disappointment brought on by the failure of the Rovers to live up to my romantic expectations.*

While he was immersed in his own thoughts, the discussion had moved on, but only to spread a glum mood over the other passengers. Conversation dwindled, then stopped. After a lengthening silence, Pollus Ermatage suggested singing the new chuffe-raising chant that Father Olwyn had taught the believers while Bandar had been inspecting the Rover carts. More nonsense, Bandar thought, but this one's rhythm — *ta-tumpa, ta-tey,* repeated endlessly — matched the rocking of the cart as they drove across the grass.

He joined in for a while, out of politeness, but soon the chanting and the growing heat of the advancing day made him sleepy. He broke off to enjoy a capacious yawn. Wasselthorpe also ceased to chant and wanted again to ply him with questions about the Commons.

"The Commons is not for you," the noönaut said. "Find another interest."

"But I am called there," Wasselthorpe said.

"All the more reason not to go. Now I mean to make good some of the sleep I did not get last night." He folded his arms across his small chest and leaned one shoulder against the upcurving rib that supported the cart's

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plaited roof. He elicited a promise from Abbas to ensure that Wasselthorpe remained awake while Bandar slept.

Bandar slipped into dream. His first impulse was to exert his noönaut ability to control its direction, but some other part of him counseled letting it unroll under its own dynamic.

He was in a garden, with neatly ordered lawn and well-tended but unremarkable flower beds. Wasselthorpe appeared and Bandar felt a frisson of fear before he realized that this was not an incursion of the other's consciousness but merely a rendering of the young man created by Bandar's own mind.

He was in the Hero's guise and, as Bandar regarded him, now memory filtered up from somewhere. He vaguely recalled the variant that wore mail, winged helmet, and wolf pelt. It was a Hero who slew a foul monster that had preyed upon ordinary men, tearing its arm off so that it ran away and died. But then a worse threat loomed, though he couldn't remember exactly what it was; the information dated from his undergraduate years, before he had fully developed his memory. Besides, noönauts worked to remember categories, not individual incidents — the totality of the Commons was far more than any mind could encompass.

Bandar observed Wasselthorpe-as-Hero cross the garden, sword held low and positioned for a coming thrust. Then the man shimmered and became just a sad-faced boy at play. He held a wooden sword and wore a toy helmet, but the way he thrust at empty air with the rough weapon showed a man's determination. And the young face showed the same serious cast of expression that governed the mature man.

Bandar sensed an unbearable poignancy in the scene and turned away. But now his gaze fell upon the Rover Yaffak. The creature stood disconsolate, ears drooping and black lips drawn downward. The noönaut took control of the dream and addressed the Rover. "What is wrong? Why do you grieve?"

Yaffak opened his mouth to answer but the only sound that emerged was an odd creaking.

Bandar awoke to the creaking of the carts. They had slowed and the Rovers were driving them in a circle to create another broad area of

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trampled grass. Erenti Abbas rubbed his substantial stomach, expressing optimism that lunch was imminent. Bandar informed him that it was too soon for the passengers to be fed. They would be stopping to rest the shuggras, which were not built for the long haul and required frequent pauses.

When the grass was flattened, the Rovers positioned the carts in a small circle at the center of the larger one, with the teams of shuggras facing outward. They lowered the tailboards that the passengers might dismount. Yaffak indicated the tall grass and said, "Empty your bodies."

Bandar translated the words into a more seemly phrase then asked, "How long will we stay?"

"Small time," Yaffak answered. "Rest shuggras. Also Rovers rest, eat little before big heat comes."

Bandar relayed the sense of this to his fellow passengers, then watched with interest as Yaffak went to join the other Rovers in the center of the circled carts where one of them had piled up jerked meat and some kind of hard biscuits. He would have liked to see a display of Rover dominance-and-submission behavior, with the junior members of the pack shouldering each other aside to eat a larger share. Instead, the Rovers took their rations without ceremony and squatted down to chew. None looked at the others or demonstrated any of the displays Bandar's studies had told him should be natural to them.

After a while, Bandar shook his head and turned away. Wasselthorpe had wandered over and now asked if something disturbed him. Bandar revealed his puzzlement at the Rovers' uncharacteristic behavior. Wasselthorpe proposed that the Rovers might have changed their ways, but Bandar dismissed the idea as not possible. Rover consciousness was a thin layer over a deep-set mass of instinct.

"They do not change," he said.

"Disease, perhaps?" the other suggested. "Perhaps this is how the lassitude affects them."

"No," Bandar said. He explained the Rovers' reaction to illness, which was for the sick one to go away and either return cured or die alone. It was an instinct that protected the pack.

They walked back to where Abbas sat in the shade of one of the carts. "You know a great deal about Rovers," Wasselthorpe said.

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"Not much more than what is common knowledge."

The young man showed a puzzled countenance. "Not common to me," he said.

Bandar wondered aloud about what other commonplaces were unknown to Wasselthorpe. Abbas pointed out that the question was a tautology; the young man could not be expected to know what else he didn't know.

Bandar conceded the point. Provincial gentlemen were not required to know much beyond the folderols of fashion and the intricacies of social rank that separated one from one's neighbors. "Yet he wears the scarf of an Institute graduate."

He saw a look pass between Abbas and Wasselthorpe. "Though only third-tier," said the fat man.

Bandar shrugged. Third-tier matriculates from country aristocracy could not be expected to shine. Still, his ignorance was sometimes startling. "What was your field of study again?" he asked.

"Criminology."

"A curious pursuit for an aristocrat," Bandar said.

Abbas chimed in with a fresh note: Wasselthorpe could quote lengthy passages from Bureau of Scrutiny manuals.

Bandar thought this a peculiar distinction. "I am sure the ability would be useful to a Bureau employee, but even the most dedicated scroot needs to encompass a wider field of knowledge than official manuals and standing orders."

Bandar saw Abbas give his student an odd look. "Perhaps the most dedicated scroot might not be aware of the need."

"A troubling thought," said Bandar, "for it would mean the man was narrow and strange, like those too tightly wound types who know everything about some limited pursuit but cannot manage a conversation about the weather."

Wasselthorpe seemed stung. "What is wrong with feeling that one has a calling?" he said.

The term gave Bandar a slight shiver. A call from the Commons was a summons that offered no return. "I remember a tale about a man who pursued a bright star. His eyes on its brilliance, he did not notice that his feet were leading him over a cliff."

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Wasselthorpe said that he was not familiar with that story. Bandar was not surprised, since it was unlikely to be found in a scroot manual.

They had walked back to their cart. "I believe I must sleep," Wasselthorpe said. Indeed, he seemed to Bandar to be almost weaving on his feet. The noönaut felt an upwelling of concern: a sudden, unaccountable need for sleep could indicate that the unconscious was exerting its influence.

"I will be sure to remain awake until you are done," he told the young man. Indeed, he meant to keep an eye on Wasselthorpe and rouse him back to consciousness if he showed signs of distressed dreaming.

The young man thanked him and laid himself down in the shade of the cart. After a moment he rolled onto his stomach and regarded the Rovers who, their meal finished, were now lying asleep. He drew Bandar's attention to Yaffak, whose legs were twitching as if he dreamed of running, and wondered if there was any danger of his intruding into the Rover's dream, as he had into Bandar's.

Bandar complimented him on his ambition, but assured him of the impenetrable Wall between Commonses of different species — though even as he said the words he thought about the Bololo and the hydromants of Gamza. There had been attempts to educate Rovers enough to have them explore their own Commons, but though some of the creatures had managed to get to the entry level of the Rover noösphere and even to view the archetypes in the prime arrondisement, they were too easily captured by the characteristic entities, and none made more than a few visits to the Rover Commons before being absorbed and lost.

"Their psyches are too much closed around by instinct," Bandar said, "nor are their upper and lower brains well separated. Not far beneath Rover consciousness lies the Old Sea of presapience, where the great blind Worm swims eternally in pursuit of its own tail."

Abbas opined that the young man might be a visionary. His offhand tone annoyed Bandar who snapped back that Wasselthorpe might also be a full-tilt loon, the terms being all too often interchangeable.

While they argued, Wasselthorpe slipped into slumber, his cheek pressed against the trampled grass. Bandar sat with his back against the cartwheel and engaged in a desultory conversation with Erenti Abbas. But he found the fat man's cynicism difficult to take in sustained doses, and

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after a while their conversation lapsed and Abbas reposed himself to sleep, as had many of the passengers. A group of others, including the two couples from Bandar's cart, had gathered to chant *ta-tumpa, ta-tey*, Brond Halorn's voice rising above the common chorus. The handful of stewards who were accompanying the passengers on this leg of the journey sat in a ring, engaged in some game of chance that brought occasional shouts and hoots of celebration or schadenfreude.

Time went by. Suddenly, Bandar saw the sleeping Yaffak give a mighty kick of one leg. The Rover's eyes flew open, so wide that Bandar could see a rim of white around each great brown iris. Yaffak sprang into a crouch, growling something Bandar could not make out. The sound awoke the other Rovers, who gazed at their enraged fellow without visible emotion.

The behavior went against everything Bandar knew about the Rovers. Yaffak's display should have earned him either growls and bristling manes or lowered heads and turned-away eyes. The one reaction it shouldn't have brought was no reaction. But the rest still looked back at the snarling Rover with cold indifference, even as Yaffak stood erect, his ruff standing straight up and his teeth bared. He barked something that Bandar thought was, "Wrong!" before he suddenly turned and raced toward his team of shuggras. He leapt onto the back of one, yanked a strap that freed the eight from the wagon, and dug his heels into his mount and raced the whole team out into the long grass.

The other Rovers had risen and for a moment Bandar thought they might go in pursuit. Then, as one, they visibly lost interest in the incident. They yelped at the stewards, who left their game and began to rouse the passengers to reboard the carts.

"What of these?" the chief steward called to the Rovers in their own language, indicating Bandar's cart.

"No seats," said the largest of the Rovers, the one who ought to have been pack leader, by Bandar's lights, but who showed none of the traits of a dominant male. Still, when the chief steward sought to argue with him about stranding eight passengers, the Rover showed his teeth. The crewman backed away, his hands offering placatory gestures, and came to Bandar's cart.

"I am sorry," he said. "There is nothing to be done."

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Abbas had risen. "We cannot stay here," he said. "Right now, a ravenous fand might be slavering over the prospect of tender human flesh. Or a woollyclaw might amble by, bundle us all into a ball of crushed limbs and torsos, then roll us off to gratify its whelps."

"The air hangs heavy with the scent of angry Rover," said the chief steward. "That will deter predators. But here is an energy pistol." He produced the weapon from a pouch at his waist. "I advise you to remain in the cart until the *Orgulon*'s gig arrives."

"How long will that be?" Bandar asked.

"It will rendezvous with the Rover carts at a place east of here, bringing a luncheon. I will summon it on my communicator, and instruct it to come and pick you up as soon as supplies have been unloaded. You will not be here long."

Abbas said, "Can you leave a communicator with us?"

"I have but the one," the man said. Waving away further protestations and trailing assurances that all would soon be well, he went to where the impatient Rover leader waited, mounted the cart, and was gone.

The stranded passengers reacted as their individual natures dictated: Ule Gazz was fatalistic, Pollus Ermatage cheerful, Abbas affecting a breezy unconcern beneath which Bandar thought to see a cool mind calculating risks and options. Flix's black mood darkened to become stygian. The lassitude sufferers were as inert as ever. It was only after cataloging these impressions that Bandar thought to take notice of the still sleeping Phlevas Wasselthorpe.

"With all the fuss, he should have awakened," he said to Abbas.

The fat man knelt and shook the sleeper, turned him over on his back and lightly slapped one cheek. He thumbed up one eyelid and saw nothing but white, the eyeball rolled up into the head. Abbas slapped him again, harder. There was no response.

"He has lapsed beyond sleep," he said. "I think he may be comatose."

"Try to rouse him," Bandar said. "I will see what I can do."

He closed his eyes and summoned the portal, went through at record speed and was soon descending the staircase to the first level. The road was empty, except for scintillating flashes made by passing dreamers. Bandar knew he would not find Wasselthorpe among them.

He summoned up a noönaut mentalism that he had not used in all the

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years since he had been an undergraduate learning his portfolio of techniques. But before he exercised the procedure, he paused and took thought for a moment. *In the Commons, it is always best to be quite clear as to what one is about,* he reminded himself. *If this brings me to Wasselthorpe, then it means that he and I are linked at some level below the obvious. And I must deal with that reality, whatever it portends.*

He focused his mind, chanted five rising tones, then two descenders, holding the last note. A ripple appeared in the air before him and he stepped through into a terrifying scene: the young man, clad again in his ancient Hero's garb, sword in hand, stood beside the great white Wall that marked the limit of the human commons. At his feet was a scar in the virtual earth, a scar that must have been a large gash shortly before, because even as Bandar took note of it the wound was healing.

But none of those sights were what frightened Bandar. Grouped around Wasselthorpe, close enough to touch, were several pure archetypes — the Hero, the Wise Man, the Father, Mother and Child, the Destroyer, the Fool, and more — a jostling crowd of characteristic entities, any one of which, at this range, should have drawn the young man's consciousness into permanent, psychotic thralldom.

Yet Wasselthorpe stood there, talking with them, uninsulated by thran, untouched by raw psychic power. Bandar immediately chanted the three, three and seven, seized Wasselthorpe by the arm, and pulled him through the gate. They arrived back in the first level of the Commons, where Bandar opened an emergency gate and brought them directly back to the waking world.

Bandar felt a wave of dizziness come over him, but he fought it down and opened his eyes. Abbas was still kneeling over his student, methodically slapping his cheeks and calling upon him to come forth from whatever corner of his psyche he had tumbled into.

Bandar reached down and restrained the fat man's hand. "It's all right," he said, "I have brought him back."

Wasselthorpe was sitting up, putting a hand to his reddened cheek.

When Abbas told him that he had been deep in coma, the young man said, "I was in the Commons of the Rovers. I entered Yaffak's dream."

"That cannot be so," Bandar said. "They would have attacked you." But even as he said it, he felt his innards chill and turn over.

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"I believe they perceived me as the Good Man, just as we sometimes encounter a friendly beast when we dream."

"Nonsense!" Bandar said, though he knew it was not. "How could you get through the Wall? It cannot be breached."

"I went by way of the Old Sea."

Bandar vehemently denied Wasselthorpe's assertion. "Only death awaits the consciousness that enters the utoposphere. It hangs there, incapable of motion, until the Worm comes to devour it."

But Wasselthorpe insisted. He said terrible things: that the archetypes had approached and had helped him, that they had given him power to cut through the floor of the Commons, swim through the gray nothingness then cut his way up into the Rover Commons. He had found Yaffak suffering, bound by some leash that went up into the sky. He had cut the tether with his Hero's sword and the Rover had raced off, free and joyous. Then he had swum back through the sea, had even seen the Worm coming, but had made it back through the opening before it could take him.

"You are lying!" Bandar muttered through clenched teeth, even as a part of him said, *He speaks the truth.*

Wasselthorpe casually mentioned that, from the Rover's side, the Wall appeared to be a hedge of black thorn bushes. Bandar wanted to clap his hands over his ears. That was a prime secret of the Institute, which no one outside its cloisters could know.

Wasselthorpe burbled on: the Wise Man had shown the way; he had used the Hero's sword to cut a gash in the earth. Bandar knew it must be true; he had seen the healing wound.

The noönaut felt as if his head might burst. The Commons was governed by rules. Thousands of noönauts had died, and tens of thousands had suffered, to delineate those rules. Then along came Wasselthorpe to pull the foundation stones from beneath a hundred millennia of established procedure. And yet, some part of Bandar said, *This is how it must be.*

The events of the morning had left him no choice but to face the grim facts: Guth Bandar was bound to Phlevas Wasselthorpe, and together their fates were entwined with the history of the Dree. What any of this meant, he did not yet know, but when he had encountered the young man at the Wall, he had seen in his face the unmistakable expression of a Hero. And

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if the two of them were linked, Bandar must play the Helper. Yet Helpers frequently failed to survive the Hero's catharsis.

"I have more to tell," Wasselthorpe said.

"Well, you would, wouldn't you?" Bandar snapped. "Spare me."

"I believe we must hear him," Abbas said. "It might illuminate the events that happened while he was wandering in dreams."

"What happened?" Wasselthorpe said.

Abbas drew his attention to the absence of the Rover carts and their passengers and stewards. He briefly recounted Yaffak's flight and the abandonment of their party. "The steward left us a weapon to defend ourselves against wild beasts.

"Or against Yaffak," said Bandar, "who seems to have gone insane."

"Yaffak will not do us harm," Wasselthorpe said, rising to his feet. "I freed him from a hateful bondage."

He told again the tale of how he had sawed through the leash that tied the dreaming Rover and wanted Bandar to tell him its meaning. But Bandar was beyond answering questions. He wished he had never heard of Phlevas Wasselthorpe and his catalog of impossibilities, so innocently recounted.

Bandar turned his back and looked away. But his outward composure belied his inner turmoil. Somewhere inside him a voice was speaking softly, telling him to be of help. He sought to close his mind against it.

Abbas took charge. "We must pull the cart into the center of the clearing and get aboard. Right now we are an easy meal for any passing fand." He summoned the chanters and Flix, now glowering ever more deeply, and they did as he directed.

Once aboard, the fat man flourished the energy pistol and asked if anyone was competent in its use. Bandar was surprised when Wasselthorpe took the weapon, expertly stripped and reassembled it, then placed it under the seat for safety's sake. The noönaut would not have thought that a provincial lordling, for all his interest in criminology, could have handled a weapon with such aplomb.

In the close confines of the stationary cart, the passengers fell to squabbling. Ule Gazz wished all to chant; she felt her chuffe swelling. Wasselthorpe rejected the concept of chuffe and sought to explore his alleged meeting with Yaffak in the Rover Commons, but Bandar refused

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to be drawn. Nor would he chant. His rebuff to Gazz caused her to disparage the relevance of the noösphere compared to the Lho-tso enlightenment. That caused Bandar to snap at her. Tempers were heating when Wasselthorpe suddenly made a startling announcement.

"Chuffe is entirely an illusion," he said. "Father Olwyn is in reality the notorious confidence trickster Horslan Gebbling, who will be taken into custody the moment my partner and I encounter him."

Ule Gazz greeted this assertion with disdain, at which Wasselthorpe declared that he and Abbas were not what they appeared to be. Instead, they were undercover agents of the Bureau of Scrutiny, sent on the cruise to apprehend Gebbling.

The others demanded proof. Wasselthorpe and Abbas dug within their clothing and produced official scroot plaques. Bandar squinted at each and learned that Wasselthorpe's true name was Baro Harkless, while Abbas was named Luff Imbry. Both held the rank of agent-ordinary.

Hence the fascination with criminal investigation, thought Bandar. Several more thoughts flitted rapidly through his mind, but the one he seized in passing was: "Your plaques allow you to call for assistance."

"We are ordered to remain incommunicado until we secure an arrest," said Harkless/Wasselthorpe.

His answer set off a new round of altercation that ended only when Flix spoke up from her corner seat to alert them to the imminent arrival of the *Orgulon*'s gig, flying in from the east.

THE SIGHT of their rescue should have brought Bandar relief. Instead he dismounted from the cart with a glum sense of foreboding. His noönaut's sensibilities were aroused and he felt as if he were not in the waking world but in a high-classification Event. Worse, it was that part of an Event's cycle when the action begins to flow rapidly toward the climax.

The gig dropped down, piloted by the landship's first officer, whose name Bandar had not acquired. Beside him was Raina Haj. The vehicle settled at the edge of the clearing and the passengers rushed from the cart to greet it, the lassitude sufferers towed on their come-alongs. Flix came last, her hands clasped behind her back.

Haj dismounted and lowered the aircraft's rear gate while the first

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officer remained at the controls. Bandar saw Harkless (he supposed he might as well adjust to the fellow's name) go to confer with the security officer, who seemed to be unimpressed with whatever the agent-ordinary told her.

Haj waved the stranded party to board the gig. Something was moving out in the grass, she said. The passengers lined up, with Flix at the tail of the queue.

"Are we going back to the *Orgulon*?" she asked.

Haj said they were not. They would be taken to a temporary camp just beyond the immense stone plateau known as the Monument, where tents and tables were laid on for a luncheon. Father Olwyn was expected to appear and offer something called "the inculcation." The *Orgulon* had been delivering equipment to the brillion mines at nearby Victor and would rendezvous with the passengers by nightfall.

Flix now advanced another agenda. She demanded to bypass the ceremony and be flown to Victor so she could arrange passage home.

"That is not a matter for you to decide," Haj told her.

Again Flix differed, but instead of offering a fresh argument, she produced the energy pistol Harkless had left in the cart. She pointed it in an unsteady two-handed grip at Raina Haj.

Now Flix looked to the first officer, who had remained in the gig's operator's seat. She addressed him by his given name and said, "Get her weapon."

The man did as he was ordered, but the smirk on his face told Bandar that there was more of a relationship between him and the young woman than they had hitherto revealed. The officer came at Haj from the rear and relieved her of her sidearm. Then he circled around the passengers to stand beside Flix, his pistol leveled at all and sundry.

"Move away from the aircraft," he told them.

Raina Haj spoke up, addressing Flix. "This is not necessary," she said.

The first officer told her to shut up, but Haj spoke on, telling Flix, "I know you didn't kill him."

"I told you it was an accident," Flix said.

"No, not an accident," Haj said.

"Shut up," the first officer repeated, aiming his weapon at Haj. Bandar

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saw his thumb extend toward the discharge stud, but Flix laid a hand on his arm and pushed it down.

"What are you trying to say?" she asked Haj.

"Lies," the man with the weapon said.

But Flix wanted to hear what the security officer had to say. She moved off a couple of steps and now her energy weapon swung halfway from Haj to the other officer.

The man did not delay a moment. A bright flash dazzled Bandar's eyes and when his vision cleared Flix was face down on the grass, a smoking hole burned through her torso.

Someone screamed and Bandar stared with both fascination and fright at the young woman's corpse. It took him a long moment to recover his equilibrium. But the murderer had remained calm; the energy pistol did not waver in his hand as he stepped back to give himself room should they try to rush him. Bandar was bemused to think that he had seen just such a look on the faces of villains many times in the Commons, though he had always done so from within the protection of a thran.

"So you know," the officer said, addressing Haj.

"Yes."

The pistol swung toward her. "Well, then."

Now Harkless spoke up. "How are you going to explain it?"

Bandar could have predicted it. The Hero would always seek to engage the villain in talk, delaying the killing stroke while he worked out some tactic to save the day. But the man with the weapon barely glanced at Harkless, and instead spoke to Haj: he would blame the killings on the unstable Flix's having gone berserk when the gig landed, even wounding him before he was able to seize Haj's pistol and dispatch her.

Bandar watched Harkless as the killer spoke. Some silent signal passed between the young agent and his plump partner. The undercover scroots were going to try something. Bandar felt a rising urge to help. He wanted to fight it, but found that his will to do so was fading. He gauged the distance between him and the man with the gun, wondering how fast his old legs would allow him to close the distance.

Now the young agent was saying something about a forgotten witness. The officer was still keeping his eye on Haj, the known danger. Bandar realized that the killer must see Harkless as only a feckless young

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lordling, afflicted by the lassitude. *This might work*, he thought, then realized with an inner start that the opinion had come not from his usual inner critic, but from a new source: the Helper was rising in him.

Bandar was struck by a sense of irreality, as if he were observing an Event or Situation in the noösphere. He saw again the Hero in the young agent's stark expression and now it came to him the particular myth that featured a Hero in a wolf pelt and winged helmet: it told of a dawn-time Hero who, after defeating a man-devouring monster, dove deep into a frigid lake to confront the troll's even more powerful mother. And in that lake, the Hero died.

He is not the Hero Triumphant, Bandar thought. *He is the Hero Sacrificial. His dynamic ends with his dying to save those he protects.*

Harkless was telling the man that Yaffak had not gone far, that the Rover was what they had seen moving in the grass as they brought the gig down, and was hearing and seeing all.

Not bad, Bandar thought. *Simple, believable. Enough to make the man stop and think.*

But when Harkless pointed to draw the officer's attention, the man did not fall for the ruse. Bandar sighed. *In real life, I suppose these things don't work as well*, he thought. He saw Harkless's muscles tense for whatever he was going to try and readied himself to join in the rush.

Harkless was at least partially in thrall to the Hero Sacrificial, but Bandar did not see in his aspect the look of one who expects to die. His face wore the assurance of one who intends to defeat an enemy, then march on to fresh challenges.

The murderer showed the same confidence. But his conviction was fortified by his possession of an energy pistol and a demonstrated capacity to use it.

His thumb slid toward the firing stud.

—Continued next issue.

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PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

Our Feynman Who Art in Heaven...

"[Ettore Majorana's] promising career was cut short with his sudden disappearance at the age of 31 during a boat trip between Palermo and Naples in Italy. His body was never found despite several investigations, and opinion is divided on whether he committed suicide, was kidnapped, or changed his identity and started a new life.

"Now, theoretical physicist Oleg Zaslavskii...is suggesting that the ambiguity surrounding his fate was part of an elaborate illusion engineered by Majorana himself to demonstrate quantum superposition.... Majorana wanted to mirror the paradox with events in his own life...."

— "The man who was both alive and dead," *New Scientist*, 5 August 2006.

COVERING the religion beat for a big city newspaper, I thought I had encountered pretty much every possible variation in mainstream faith, and every minor cult imaginable. Among the major religions, I had interviewed and sympathetically written up worshippers from Jehovah's Witnesses to Mormons, Transcendental Meditators to Wiccans, Nichiren Buddhists to Scientologists, Moslems to Shintoists. Once I had even spoken to Cardinal Ratzinger, before he became the Pope. We had been at a charity banquet together and I had asked him to pass the salt. But still....

Yet none of my fieldwork had prepared me for the Majoranists.

My editor called me in that eventful day and brusquely gave me my new assignment.

"Apparently there's some kind of strange new church on the corner of Hoyle and Wickramasinghe. Why don't you check it out?"

Armed with a small digital voice recorder, a backup notebook, and my tattered copy of *Larson's New Book of Cults*, I set out.

As soon as the taxi discharged

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me, I knew I was in for a unique experience.

The building hosting the new church literally hurt my eyes.

I couldn't seem to focus on its shape. Rooms and wings and extensions appeared to sprout and dissolve, coming and going. Eventually I gathered an impression of some kind of matrix of cubes adjoining each other at impossible angles.

Finally, by closing my eyes and advancing blindly up the walkway, I was able to attain the front door and ring a bell.

When I sensed the door swinging open, I raised my eyelids.

The person facing me, with an utterly normal reception room backgrounding him, was a young, brown-haired man of average appearance, wearing a white robe. The front of his robe bore a single large black lowercase "n."

"Hello," said the man pleasantly. "I'm Nick, a Neutron. Welcome to the First Majoranist Temple. Won't you come in, please?"

I stepped inside and the door swung closed.

I introduced myself to Nick and explained my mission. He reacted very enthusiastically.

"This is wonderful! Our religion has never had any publicity before, and we're eager to attract converts. I'll be happy to answer any questions you might have."

"Well, first — what kind of structure is this?"

"Oh, that's simple. It's a four-dimensional tesseract. A hypercube. Have you ever read Heinlein's '—And He Built a Crooked House—'?"

"No, I can't say I have...."

"Well, do so! You'll learn all you need to know. But surely our church building is less interesting than our congregation and beliefs."

"Yes, you're right of course. I believe you called yourself a 'Majoranist'...?"

"That's correct." Nick proceeded to explain the life story of Ettore Majorana, the man who had inspired their cult.

"So," I said, "you worship this scientist for his dedication to his field...?"

"Not at all. We merely regard him as a prophet and saint, the rock upon which our church was founded. What we worship is the Standard Model."

"The Standard Model of what?"

Nick made an exasperated face. "There is only one Standard Model, and that's the current consensus paradigm of modern physics."

"You mean, all that stuff about subatomic particles?"

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"Precisely. Although your crude summary of the subject of our faith hardly does it justice. The Standard Model is, more elegantly put, mankind's best apprehension and summation and understanding of how creation works. Can you conceive of a better text for governing one's life, or a more fit object of worship?"

"I don't make judgments about anyone's beliefs, Nick. Why don't you just continue to explain things to me, as you'd like our readers to hear?"

"Very well. I'll give you a tour of our various halls of worship."

We set off across the reception room, heading toward an arched exit. When I stepped through the arch, I felt twisted through a dozen different dimensions. Suddenly I found myself in a dimly lit room not previously visible through the opening.

Tightly bunched trios of people, all in white robes adorned with various Greek and Roman letters, interspersed the room.

"All of our postulants begin as quarks," explained Nick. "The most primal particles. Strange, charm, up, down, top, bottom. They seek to shape their mentalities so as to empathetically grok this lowest level of creation."

"Why are they all knotted up in threes?"

"Because that's how real quarks aggregate, in unbreakable sets of three."

Peering through the dimness, I realized that each knot of three concealed a fourth person in the middle. I inquired about the identity of these hidden souls.

"Oh, those are W and Z bosons. They mediate the weak force that holds the quarks together."

It all looked and sounded rather kinky to me, and I suspected that perhaps the Majoranists were another sex cult like so many before them.

But if these were orgiasts, they were stolid and dispassionate, standing motionless with no groping. I felt very confused.

Leaving the bland groups behind, we made another shocking transition, and this time I found myself in a large, bright, airy hall. The hall was filled with a tremendous number of people, most of them zipping to and fro.

"We call this room the 'Cloud Chamber.' After graduating from quark status," explained Nick, "our postulants become fermions and bosons of various sorts, depending on their innate qualities. Electrons, muons, protons, leptons. Photons,

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gravitons and Higgs bosons. At least we think there are some Higgs bosons present—no one's ever quite seen one. But in any case, they mingle in a kind of undifferentiated cosmic soup, akin to the universal cosmic state some time after the Big Bang. Then, gradually, they settle out into atoms and molecules."

I observed the chaotic scene for a while. It resembled recess at a Montessori school. Then I asked, "Can I see the next stage too, please?"

Nick waved me off. "Oh, it's very boring at that point, I'm afraid. After the phase change, it's all mere chemistry and biology."

"Do you mind if I interview another Majoranist?"

"Well, most of my co-religionists are very energetic at this stage, but you're welcome to try."

I approached several candidates, but they all ignored me and raced off, hither and thither. Nick laughed at my efforts.

"Good luck capturing a neutrino! They don't interact with anyone! We neutrons are about the only ones who are slow and solid enough to conduct a conversation."

So I sought out another Majoranist wearing a lowercase "n" and interviewed her. She confirmed everything that Nick had told me.

The tumult of the Majoranist "service" was giving me a headache. I asked Nick if we could adjourn to the reception area, and he agreed.

Back in the anteroom, alone with Nick, I said, "It seems as if your church features no hierarchy. Don't you have leaders of any sort? Wise men and women who decide matters of doctrine?"

"Why, yes, we do. The Constants."

"The Constants?"

"The Standard Model acknowledges several universal constants. The speed of light in a vacuum, the fine-structure constant, Newton's gravitational constant. Then there are the ones named after Planck, Dirac, Boltzmann, Bohr, von Klitzing, Josephson, Fermi, and others."

"You're saying that certain Majoranists attain the rank of Constant then?"

Nick's face acquired a dreamy, reverential look, like that of a teenager coming face-to-face with a pop idol. "Yes. It's a status all of us aspire to. But although many are called, few are chosen."

"Well, I believe I've learned enough to write a feature on your church. If you'd show me out now, please...."

"Certainly."

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Nick conducted me to what appeared to be the same door through which I had entered from the corner of Hoyle and Wickramsinghe. But when I stepped through, I found myself in Chicago, half a continent away.

After some tribulations I eventually made my way back home and began to write up my piece on the Majoranists. But in researching the Standard Model I discovered some puzzling things that caused me to return to the church.

Nick greeted me on the doorstep once again. I cautiously did not enter.

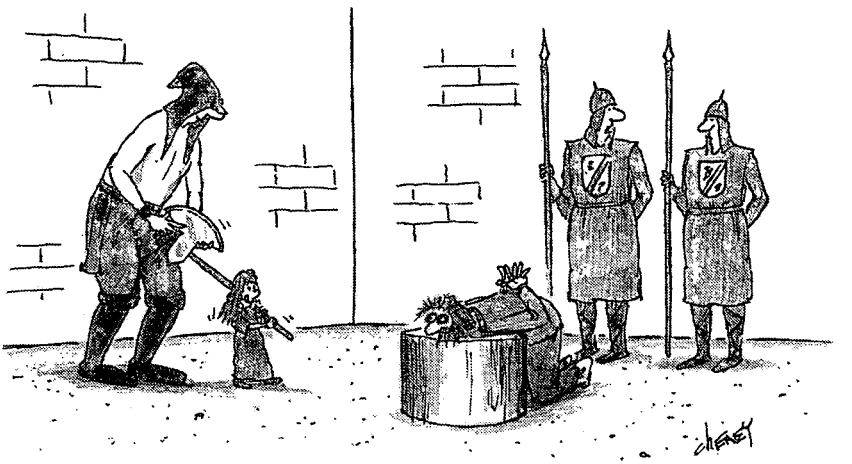
"Nick, I need to ask you some questions. What about string theory? What about quantum loop gravity? What about various GUTs? These are all rival theories that contradict the Standard Model."

Nick became enraged. He wiggled his hands through the air, sketching out what I later discovered was a complex Feynman diagram.

"Heretics! Blasphemers! Go! You are no longer welcome here!"

So I left. And because I never got my questions answered, I never wrote the article.

I was just thankful I wasn't attending a Majoranist service when their temple folded up and vanished.



"It's bring your daughter to work day."

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A proud owner of a first edition of Gravity's Rainbow, *S. L. Gilbow says that he considers Thomas Pynchon to be something of an extrovert. This story marks his first published story. (Mr. Gilbow's first, that is, not Pynchon's.)*

Red Card

By S. L. Gilbow

LATE ONE APRIL EVENING, Linda Jackson pulled a revolver from her purse and shot her husband through a large mustard stain in the center of his T-shirt. The official after-incident survey concluded that almost all of Merry Valley approved of the shooting. Sixty-four percent of the townspeople even rated her target selection as "excellent." A few, however, criticized her, pointing out that shooting your husband is "a little too obvious" and "not very creative."

Dick Andrews, who had farmed the fertile soil around Merry Valley for over thirty years, believed that Larry Jackson, more than anyone else in town, needed to be killed. "I never liked him much," he wrote in the additional comments section of the incident survey: "He never seemed to have a good word to say about anybody."

"Excellent use of a bullet," scrawled Jimmy Blanchard. Born and raised in Merry Valley, he had known Larry for years and had even graduated from high school with him. "Most overbearing person I've ever met. He deserved what he got. I'm just not sure why it took so long."

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Of course, a few people made waves. Jenny Collins seemed appalled. "I can hardly believe it," she wrote. "We used to be much more discerning about who we killed, and we certainly didn't go around flaunting it the way Linda does." Jenny was the old-fashioned kind.

Linda would never have called her actions "flaunting it." Of course she knew what to do after shooting Larry. She had read *The Enforcement Handbook* from cover to cover six times, poring over it to see if she had missed anything, scrutinizing every nuance. She had even committed some of the more important passages to memory: *Call the police immediately after executing an enforcement — Always keep your red card in a safe, dry place — Never reveal to anyone that you have a red card — Be proud; you're performing an important civic duty.*

But flaunting it? No, Linda blended in better than anyone in town, rarely talked and never called attention to herself. She spent most of her days at the Merry Valley Public Library, tucked between rows of antique shelves, alone, organizing a modest collection of old books. In the evening she fixed dinner. After Larry had eaten, cleaned up, and left the house for "some time alone," Linda would lie in bed reading Jane Austen. No, Linda never flaunted anything — never had much to flaunt.

After she shot her husband, Linda returned the revolver to her purse and collapsed onto her oversized couch. She then picked up the telephone, set it in her lap, and tugged at her long, pale bangs — a nervous habit that drove Larry crazy. She had once considered cutting them to make him happy, but Sarah Hall from across the street had commented on how nice they looked. "They really bring out your eyes," Sarah had said. "They make you look as pretty as a princess."

Linda would never have called herself pretty, but she always looked as nice as she could. Her makeup — tasteful and modest — came straight out of page twenty-seven of the current issue of *Truly Beautiful.* She applied her eyeliner, mascara, lipstick, and blush precisely according to the instructions, copying every detail of the model's face, framing each eye with two delicate, taupe lines. But she realized she could do no better than pass as the model's homely cousin.

Linda let go of her bangs, lifted the receiver and dialed a number from a yellow sticker plastered across the phone; the sticker doubled as an ad

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for Bob's Pizza Heaven, so she dialed carefully.

"Merry Valley Police Department."

"I'd like to report an enforcement," said Linda.

"Linda?"

"Yes," she replied, trying to recognize the voice.

"This is Officer Hamilton."

"Oh, thank goodness," she said, unable to hide her relief. She admired Officer Hamilton. Once, while making his usual patrol through Merry Valley, he had pulled over to help her carry two bags of groceries, heavy with the dead weight of frozen meat and canned vegetables. He was probably just fighting boredom, but she still appreciated the help. You rarely found that kind of service anymore.

Linda paused, wondered what tone to strike, and settled on matter-of-fact. "I've just shot someone. *The Enforcement Handbook* says I'm supposed to call you."

"That's right," said Officer Hamilton. "Chapter Three, I think. Who did you shoot?"

"My husband."

"Is he dead?" he asked.

Linda studied Larry, sensitive to any movement, the slightest twitch. "He's not moving." she said. "He hasn't moved since I shot him."

"How many times did you shoot him?"

"Once," she said.

"I'd recommend you shoot him one more time just to be sure," said Officer Hamilton.

"No," said Linda, "I'm sure he's dead enough." *The Enforcement Handbook* recommended at least two shots, but the thought of shooting Larry again bothered Linda. The first shot hadn't been easy, in spite of what the handbook said.

"Fine then, but you'll need to come down to the station to fill out the paperwork."

"Of course," she said. "Do I need to call someone to pick him up?" The handbook hadn't mentioned how to remove the body.

"We'll take care of that," said Officer Hamilton. "Just come down to the station and don't forget to bring your red card. You do have a red card, don't you?"

"I do," she said.

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"Wonderful," said Officer Hamilton.

"And I'll bring the revolver," she said, paraphrasing a portion from chapter two of the handbook.

"And any spare ammunition you didn't use," said Officer Hamilton. "We can reissue it with the card."

Linda hung up, set the phone on the floor, and rose from the couch. She looked at Larry, and the longer she looked at him the more she expected him to move; it seemed so unnatural for him to be so still, so silent — he had always been in motion. Early in their courtship she pictured him as a hummingbird — a large, gawky hummingbird — but lately she saw him as something else — perhaps a mongoose.

"Larry," she said without taking her eyes off him. She wondered if she should follow Officer Hamilton's advice and shoot him again. But there was no movement, no sound. She thought he looked like he was asleep, but then she remembered the constant rolling and snoring that marked his nights. No second shot would be needed.

Linda felt an urge to wash. She stepped around Larry's body, crossed the living room and passed through the spare bedroom into the bathroom. Linda filled the sink with warm water, adding a delightful mixture of strawberry and watermelon soap. The crimson color had never bothered her before, but now she braced herself as she plunged her hands into the water. She scrubbed her hands for more than a minute; it seemed like the right thing to do.

After she dried her hands on a monogrammed towel, Linda went to her bedroom. Larry and Linda referred to it as the "spare bedroom," but it was the one room Linda had all to herself, her refuge from Larry when he got wild — even wilder than usual. The room became her sanctuary, and Larry rarely entered it. Not that Linda forbade him to do so. It was just that Linda had filled it with things that made him uncomfortable. A large four-poster bed dominated the center of the room. On top of the bed were a handmade quilt, a pile of embroidered throw pillows, and a stuffed animal Larry had given to Linda years ago. Linda called the animal "Sally Cat" but lately had considered the possibility that it might be a ferret. Beside the bed stood an antique vanity bordered by two windows, each framed with lace curtains adorned with a delicate tea rose pattern. The room radiated Linda; there was little about Larry in it.

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Linda scanned her closet and filtered through a row of clothes she had worn only once — a wedding dress, a pink prom dress, and an evening gown. She finally settled on a gathered lavender dress. She had once worn it to The Merry Valley Bistro, the one restaurant in town Linda looked forward to. Larry criticized her for being overdressed, and she hadn't worn the dress since. But tonight it seemed right — the lavender dress and a matching pair of high-heeled shoes. Linda wasn't sure who might be at the police station, but crowds had a way of forming in Merry Valley, and she wanted to be presentable. "Besides," she thought, "there's no chance of Larry objecting."

When she finished dressing, Linda gathered the red card, the government revolver, and the last two rounds of ammunition, and dropped them into her purse. She checked her makeup in the vanity mirror and then, deciding she was in no mood to drive, called a taxi.

She opened the front door, paused, and surveyed the living room one last time. "Damn it, Larry," she said. "I gave you fair warning."

LINDA STEPPED into the dark night of a new moon. Her outdoor light had burned out weeks ago, but the porch light on Sarah Hall's house across the street blazed like a beacon, allowing Linda to navigate her steps safely. Sarah, swaying in time to a big band tune coming from her living room, deadheaded flowers that grew in large pots that framed her house. She was a large, nocturnal woman with a strong jaw and an unmistakable silhouette.

As Linda neared the street, Sarah was attracted by the unexpected movement and gave a friendly wave. Linda wished she hadn't been noticed, but if she had to deal with anyone tonight, besides the police — which at this point seemed inevitable — it might as well be Sarah. Linda liked Sarah and believed Sarah liked her too. She liked the way Sarah complimented her bangs; she liked the cheesecakes Sarah occasionally brought over; she liked her sisterly advice. Often Linda would call Sarah when Larry acted up. "You should get help," Sarah would say. Linda would agree and then tell her how she was starting to get things under control, how she and Larry were going to work things out with just a little more time, but Linda knew that the time needed to work things out with Larry was most aptly measured in geological terms.

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Linda stopped between two small pear trees to wait for the taxi. She stooped under one and felt the soil — she would need to water it tomorrow. Larry had purchased the trees on the way back from their honeymoon five years ago. The trees were the only fond memory she had of that week.

Larry had surprised her with a Caribbean cruise, although Linda thought they had decided to go to New York. They spent two days in the Bahamas, but Linda refused to count it as one of the places she had actually visited since she never left the ship.

"You ever been on a cruise before?" Larry asked as they entered their suite.

The question surprised Linda. Surely they had discussed cruises in the five months they had known each other. She thought for a moment, but no such conversation came to mind. "No," she said, "this will be my first time."

"You're going to love it here," he said.

But she didn't. Within two hours she was heaving into the toilet.

"You should give it more of a chance," Larry said.

"I'll try," she said.

"It's all in your attitude."

"I think I'm feeling a little better," she whispered, trying to prove him right. Then she grabbed the rim of the toilet and vomited again.

Larry spent the rest of their honeymoon pacing the ship's deck. Occasionally, between doses of Dramamine, Linda would look out the cabin window. She had never seen so much water. Larry refused to join her, refused to eat with her, refused to talk to her. He had decided to boycott any activity that included Linda.

Linda stood under the pear tree until the taxi arrived. As it pulled over, Sarah dropped her pruning sheers and dashed across the street.

"Sarah, I would love to talk but I need to go."

"I would say so." Sarah opened the taxi door and slid into the back seat; she waved for Linda to join her. Linda crawled in.

"Just tell me, dear," said Sarah, "why did you shoot him?"

"Where to?" asked the driver.

"The police station," said Linda.

The taxi sped into the night.

* * *

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Linda stared out the window as the simple homes of Merry Valley slipped by. She felt Sarah's strong hands grab her arm and pull her close. "Now don't you worry," said Sarah. "You're not worried, are you?"

"A little," admitted Linda.

"There's nothing to it. Really. I had a cousin once who used a red card, and he said it was the easiest thing he ever did."

"Who'd he use it on?" asked Linda.

"I don't remember. It's been years. At least five and it wasn't around here."

"He said it was easy?"

"I think he shot a speeder. He always hated careless drivers."

Linda buried her face into the fat flesh of Sarah's right arm. She wanted to cry. The handbook had mentioned this — *Shooter's Regret. It will pass,* the handbook stated, *just trust your decision, trust your instincts.*

"When I was young, I used to drive around with my cousin," said Sarah. "He would yell at people all the time. Yell at them for going too slow, for going too fast, for cutting him off. I wasn't surprised when I heard he had used a red card."

"It wasn't easy," said Linda.

"Think he got an award for it. Used the card the same week he got it. A lot of people like to see the cards circulate. Lets more people take part in the system."

"How'd you know I used a red card?"

"Why, dear, I heard it on the radio. They broke into *Phil's Follies.* There's nothing as exciting as one of the cards being used."

"I guess," said Linda. She didn't mind excitement; she just didn't want the excitement to revolve around her.

By the time Linda and Sarah arrived at the police station, a small crowd had already gathered. Sarah wrapped an arm around Linda and pulled her close. "Okay, dear, you ready for this?"

Linda nodded.

"You stay by me," she snapped with authority. Linda pulled in close for protection.

Linda recognized several faces in the crowd — Jerry Miles, Freddy

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Nevers, and Ann Davidson. She knew them well enough to carry on casual conversation at The Happy Druggist — Jerry's store — or Mel's Fill 'Em Up where Freddy and Ann worked. There were also half a dozen people not quite as familiar to her, but she had seen them all around town at one time or another.

Freddy Nevers called her name, and Jerry Miles even shouted a little encouragement: "Way to go!"

Deputy Williams met Linda and Sarah at the entrance to the police station and escorted them to the reception counter. At one point, Jerry, excited at having his monotonous evening livened up a little, dashed toward Linda to congratulate her, but Deputy Williams reached out and shoved him back. Linda gave the deputy an appreciative glance. "Where were you when I needed you?" she thought.

Barry Giles, lead reporter for Channel Seven, moved as close to Linda as he could, microphone in hand, ready to broadcast the details to all of Merry Valley. "How did it happen, Mrs. Jackson?" he called out.

Linda started to answer, but the deputy interrupted in a low forceful voice he saved for his most serious duties. "There'll be time for that later."

Officer Hamilton was waiting for Linda behind a mahogany reception desk. Linda pulled a revolver out of her purse and laid it gently in front of him. After Officer Hamilton confirmed the revolver to be official government property, the crowd, giving Linda some space out of politeness while inching forward out of curiosity, waited for the inevitable. Linda reached into her purse and pulled out the red card. The card didn't seem special. It was small, only half the size of a postcard, with rounded corners and a smooth edge. The one mark on it was an ordinary bar code.

"Son of a gun," said Barry.

"Killed by a librarian with a red card," said Jerry. "That's got to be embarrassing."

"I knew she had it," said a voice Linda didn't recognize.

"Like hell you did," came a muffled response.

Officer Hamilton slid the card under an electronic reader and, with a nod, confirmed its authenticity.

"How long you been holding it?" asked someone from the crowd.

Officer Hamilton checked the reading. "Four years," he said, impressed at Linda's self-restraint. The crowd nodded its approval.

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"My goodness," said Barry. "Most of the other tickets have been circulating a lot faster than that."

"Sure have," said Officer Hamilton.

"How long have they been out?" Barry asked.

"A couple have been out for almost a year and one for about nine months. I'm not sure about the other two. I'd have to look it up."

"Looks like another one's going back into circulation," someone said. The crowd hummed with excitement.

Officer Hamilton led Linda away from the crowd. Linda glanced back at Sarah who signaled that she would be in the waiting room, an unimpressive area set off by gray partitions. It contained little more than four chairs, a television dangling from the ceiling, and two ash trays. "Thanks," mouthed Linda.

They ended up in a small, secluded room in the back of the station. Linda took her place in a wooden chair behind an aging table. On a corner shelf stood a drip coffeepot containing the last few drops after a long day.

Officer Hamilton held up a Styrofoam cup. "Coffee? Looks like there's enough for one more cup."

"No thanks," said Linda. She could have actually used a cup of coffee, but not from that pot.

Officer Hamilton sat in the chair across from Linda. "Well," he said, "The enforcement isn't over . . ."

"Until the paperwork's done," finished Linda, quoting the handbook. "This is the hard part, isn't it?"

"There's no hard part," he said. "It's all easy." He smiled, placed an official-looking form on the table and put on a pair of bifocals. He read the form quickly to himself, vocalizing a few key phrases, orienting himself on how to proceed.

"Are you ready?" he finally asked. Linda nodded.

"What is your name?"

Linda gave him a "you've got to be kidding me" look.

"These are standard questions, Linda. Just humor me."

"Linda Jackson."

"Gender?"

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Linda didn't even answer. "Female," said Officer Hamilton in response to his own question. "Marital Status?"

"Widowed," said Linda.

"Oh yes," he said. "That's kind of why we're here, isn't it."

"It is."

"Where did you execute the enforcement?"

"In my living room."

"Why did you execute the enforcement?"

"Is that important?" asked Linda.

"We track these things for statistical purposes."

"I think the real question should be why didn't I do it sooner."

"Why didn't you? You've had the red card for almost four years."

"I don't know. At first I didn't want to use it because then I wouldn't have one. But later it just became a challenge."

"A challenge?"

"Sometimes he would egg me on, dare me to use it."

"He knew you had a red card?"

Linda wasn't sure how to answer this. She knew she wasn't supposed to tell Larry about the red card.

"Just answer honestly," said Officer Hamilton. "You have nothing to worry about. You performed an enforcement while in possession of a valid red card. That's it. It's that simple. These questions are just to help us improve the program."

"He knew," said Linda. "He's known for years. It was a mistake to tell him because then he would test me. It was like Russian roulette."

Officer Hamilton made a quick note.

"Is that all right? Am I in trouble?"

"Well, some people view it as having an unfair advantage over other citizens. But in this case it doesn't seem to have made a difference."

"But it should have made a difference." Linda looked at Officer Hamilton and wondered if she was getting through to him. She wanted to tell him how things were supposed to be different, how they were supposed to get better, slowly, incrementally, but better. Her plans were never to kill Larry but to keep him alive, to keep him alive forever. "It should have made a big difference," she said. "He knew I had a card."

"Had he been drinking?"

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"He'd been out messing around. He always seemed to be going someplace."

"Why did you shoot him?" asked Officer Hamilton, trying the question one more time.

"I really don't know," said Linda. "I think I just snapped?"

"Linda," he said. His eyes narrowed. "People with red cards are allowed to snap. It's their duty to snap."

Officer Hamilton pressed on with questions for almost half an hour. How did you feel? Where did you keep your card? Did the handbook prepare you for your role as an enforcer? Linda answered as best she could, but she was ready for it all to end.

Finally, Officer Hamilton put down his pencil. "That's it," he said.

"Really?"

"That wasn't so bad was it?"

"Not too bad. Anything else?"

"Just a word of advice," said Officer Hamilton. "If you ever get another red card, don't tell anyone. I don't even know who has them. The program is random and anonymous. That's what makes it work. If you start taking those factors out, the program loses its effectiveness."

"Of course," she said, a little embarrassed at having made such a careless mistake.

OFFICER HAMILTON released Linda and led her to the hallway out. "Do you need a ride?" he asked.

"I'll go back with Sarah," she said. "I could use a restroom though."

In the restroom, Linda checked herself in the mirror. Her lipstick had faded from the right side of her upper lip, and black mascara crept up toward her eyebrow. Her blush had cracked except for the glow on her nose. The night had been hard on her face; she looked old and tired. She freshened her lipstick, brushed her hair, and killed the shine on her nose. It seemed futile. She would need to check *Truly Beautiful* for a look that could hold up better.

Linda left the restroom and walked down the long hall to join Sarah in the waiting area. She paused at the end of the hall, dwarfed by the partitions that separated the waiting area from the rest of the police

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station. She could hear voices, several of them, mingling, Sarah's dominant among them.

Linda looked above the partition and saw a small television, muted and pathetic, hanging from the ceiling. The television's color had shifted long ago, and a bald, blue man in a sweater dispensed advice. She thought she might have seen him before. He seemed vaguely familiar. Was his name Richard? She wasn't sure, but he seemed like a Richard to her. Maybe it wasn't advice; he could be warning her about something, some disaster, some great flood.

"Well I know what I'll do if I get the card next," she heard Jerry Miles say.

"Shoot yourself?" asked Freddy Nevers.

"Never mind, I just changed my plan," cackled Jerry.

"Well, if either of you get a card, let me know," said Sarah. "You tend to live a lot longer if you know who has the cards."

Richard now held a green spray bottle. He was selling something. Of course. Why advise or warn when you can sell? Linda decided to wait until the conversation settled down a little more before joining Sarah. Conversations tended to die once Linda entered into them.

"I never know who has the cards," said Jerry.

"I try to make it my business," said Sarah. "I try to make everything my business." She spit out the words as if they were rehearsed.

Richard, energetic and passionate now, waved the bottle about in his left hand. He held up a shirt and sprayed it. Linda moved closer to the television, but she couldn't tell if the spray had any effect. Richard sprayed the bottle on the floor and then on himself. He was obviously proud of its versatility. He looked straight at Linda and urged her to buy his product. She needed it. She needed to have what he was selling.

"What about Linda?" asked Jerry.

"I've known Linda for years," said Sarah. "Her husband too."

"I knew her," said Freddy.

"But not like I knew her, dear."

Linda hated to interrupt; Sarah seemed to be enjoying herself. She wondered what it would be like to enjoy yourself. Linda continued to watch the commercial, one of those long ones, one of those that could go on for five minutes. Richard had toned down the sell and appeared to be

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whispering, enunciating every word. He had two bottles now, one cradled under each arm, and he was talking to Linda, directly to Linda, only to Linda.

"Well, she shops at my store," said Jerry. "Buys a lot of makeup. Careful shopper. Always did like her."

"Sweetheart, you have to like someone who has a red card," said Sarah. "Kind of dangerous not to."

"How would I have known she had a red card?" asked Jerry.

"I knew," said Sarah.

"You knew she had a red card?"

"Of course she had the card."

"I suspected, but I was never sure," said a voice Linda didn't recognize. He seemed to be acting more important than he actually was.

"I've known it for years. I'm surprised you all didn't know." Sarah paused for effect. "Oh, I forgot, you all weren't sleeping with her husband?" The crowd laughed. "Well, I guess I won't have to like her anymore," said Sarah.

Richard made his final plea. Under him flashed a phone number, barely legible, followed by the words, "Miracle Madness, for when clean isn't clean enough." Linda listened for the conversation to continue, but it had stalled. Even Sarah was silent.

Linda pulled back into the hall, found a phone near the ladies restroom, and called the toll-free number.

"I want to place an order," said Linda.

"Which product?"

"Miracle Madness."

"Oh, you are going to love it. And with that you get Miracle Madness Plus."

After Linda had provided her billing information, she joined Sarah and the others in the waiting room. "Sarah," she said as she rounded the partition, "I'm all done now."

"Wonderful," said Sarah. "You've had a hard day and it's time to get you home."

When the taxi dropped them off at Linda's place well after midnight, Sarah was in full motion, feeding off the energy of the evening. Linda had

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been quiet during the drive home, but she didn't need to speak since Sarah had rambled on without stopping. Sarah had pretty well resolved most of Linda's problems. She had told her how to improve her career — *after all you can't stay a librarian your entire life.* She had told her how to improve her looks — *those bangs just have to go; they do absolutely nothing for you.* She had told her how to improve her general disposition — *you have got to stop moping about.*

Finally Linda asked, "What do I do now?"

"What do you mean?"

"The handbook never talked about this part. I don't know what to do next."

"Well," said Sarah, "tomorrow we need to plan Mr. Jackson's funeral. I guess that would be next."

"Of course," said Linda.

"Then we bury him, and then you get on with your life."

"We need to plan a funeral," said Linda.

"Now don't be afraid to call if you need anything," said Sarah as they entered the house. "Really. Anything at all."

"Anything?"

"Absolutely. Whatever you need."

"Can I stay with you?" asked Linda.

"Stay with me?"

Linda nodded.

"At my house?"

"For a while. At least a day or two. Longer if I could."

"You really need to get back on your feet," said Sarah. "*This* is your home and it doesn't do any good to run from it. *This* is your place."

"My place," said Linda. She stood over the spot where Larry had lain. Now that he was gone, the room seemed much more open, almost cavernous.

Sarah joined her. "Is this it?" she asked.

"He fell right here next to the coffee table," replied Linda.

"They really are quite efficient. The enforcement program is run so well."

"It is," agreed Linda, noticing that even the blood had been cleaned up. All that remained was a small stain, barely noticeable, no worse than

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the tea spill on the other side of the room. But Linda would get all the stains out, the blood, the tea, everything. After all, Miracle Madness was on its way.

"I can stay for a bit," said Sarah, turning on the television. She folded onto the couch, pried her shoes off, and clicked through channels looking for the television version of *Phil's Follies*.

"Stay for as long as you can," said Linda. "I'll be with you in a moment. After I change." The lavender dress was beginning to weigh on her.

In her bedroom, Linda slipped off her high heels and set them in her closet. She then pulled off her dress and hung it neatly on a padded hanger. She lay down on her bed, closed her eyes, and folded her hands over her face. She exhaled, bathing her eyes and nose in the warmth of her own breath. She opened her mouth and made a guttural sound that echoed off her cupped hands.

She rolled onto her stomach, grabbed her stuffed cat, Sally, and pulled her close. She wanted to be a cat. No, a ferret, she would rather be a ferret. Linda slid off the bed and crouched on her hands and knees, almost feral. She could sleep here. She could sleep on the carpet once it was clean. That would be soon; Miracle Madness was coming.

"When clean isn't clean enough," she moaned.

Linda reached under the bed and felt around blindly. She pulled out a shoe box adorned with a lavender bow — a beautiful bow she had tied nine months earlier. She loved tying bows and she was proud of this one, bold and perfectly proportioned. Lavender — she loved lavender. Linda untied the bow and carefully slid the ribbon off the box. She opened the box, pulled out a red card and a small revolver, and finally cried for the first time that night.

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FILMS

KATHI MAIO

IN A DARK AND RAINY CITY OF LIGHTS

THIS should probably be a very embarrassing confession, but I am awfully foggy about the differences between comic books and graphic novels. Oh, I understand that there are few similarities between say, the latest fictional Archie adventure to hit the newsstand and the hardbound memoirs of Marjane Satrapi. (Just as wholesome Riverdale is a far cry and half a world away from revolutionary Tehran.) But there are plenty of instances where the differences between the various drawn-and-written literary forms are much harder to distinguish. And if you throw in Asian (now morphing internationally) manga, it becomes even more baffling.

The film industry doesn't always know what to call this stuff, either. But they know that they want to exploit the material, the themes, and even the looks of graphic fiction and autobiography.

The most jealously courted and most often produced screen adaptations still come from the comic book tradition of the superhero. There have been scores of these movies. And it has been interesting to see popular culture Zeitgeist reflected in the ever-changing portrayal of old standbys like Batman and Superman over the decades. It is also interesting to see how very different more recent "superhero" creations — like Mike Mignola's *Hellboy*, who made it onto the big screen in an under-viewed but quite good adaptation written and directed by Guillermo del Toro — are from the older and more cleanly heroic tights-wearing wonders.

Feature-length adaptations of comic books have (despite the technical FX challenges) primarily

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consisted of live-action movie-making. And even the less cartoonish graphic fiction and memoirs of authors like Daniel Clowes (see Terry Zwigoff's wonderful film version of *Ghost World* from 2001) and Harvey Pekar (see Berman and Pulcini's equally fabulous adaptation of *American Splendor* from 2003) have almost entirely relied on live-action photography.

Sensitive direction combined with the complex performances of talented actors (like *Ghost World*'s Thora Birch and *American Splendor*'s Paul Giamatti) add real depth to minimalist drawn and inked storytelling, allowing a coming-of-age dramedy like *Ghost World* or a dyspeptic wallow-in-middle-age dramedy like *American Splendor* to work well as motion pictures, and not just simply as comic book adaptations.

However, when a film consists of photographing living actors as they populate a set director's physical environment, then for good or ill, the vivid, vital, and sometimes harsh impact of the original graphic work is essentially lost. In one sense, it doesn't matter that Spidey and *Ghost World*'s Enid began as drawn figures, because the film adaptations they live in retain no real connection to their illustrated (you call it comic book, I call it graphic novel) source material.

In the last couple of years, as amazing advances have been made in the field of computer and video FX, some filmmakers have accepted the challenge to create a movie that retains a real graphic novel sensibility while still fully utilizing the nuanced performances of live actors.

The most successful to date is Robert Rodriguez's 2005 hyper-violent noir *Sin City* (co-helmed by Frank Miller, the man who created the original comics). I don't want to talk about it at length, since it is not really sf or fantasy. But I want to take a minute to acknowledge the brilliant job Mr. Rodriguez *(Spy Kids)* did in fully utilizing the voice, body, and facial performances of a first-rate cast (including Bruce Willis, Clive Owen, and an astonishingly good Mickey Rourke), while still washing out almost all of their flesh tones and almost all of the varied colors in their digitally created and/or CGI-enhanced sets.

This noir world is one of black, white, and gray — with just an occasional splash of color. We may momentarily see the blue of a young woman's eye, the red satin of a prostitute's heart-shaped bed, or the putrid yellow flesh of a living-dead

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pedophilic serial killer. But in most scenes, we see black, white, and gray. This truly is a graphic novel come to life, and as such is incredibly well done. Beautiful, even. If only the story weren't so gruesomely and extravagantly violent.

To say that the content of *Sin City* is not really my taste is an understatement of huge proportions. And yet I could not take my gaze off the screen as I watched it. The intersecting comic book plots worked, and the stereotyped tough guy and whore heroes were oddly affecting characters. The film even boasts touches of wonderfully ghoulish humor (notably in Rourke's man-beast avenger's joie de assassinat and the cautionary commentary provided by a corpse played by Benicio Del Toro).

Sin City melds the graphic novel and the live-action film in a way that honors the strengths of both. I wish I could say the same for a more recent feature from France called *Renaissance*.

A dystopic crime procedural set in Paris in 2054, *Renaissance* was created by filming live actors using a mocap (motion capture) process similar to that used in 2004's woeful kiddie flick *Polar Express*, and then superimposing the actors onto an imagined futuristic multi-level Parisian landscape, all while converting color and texture into a stark, striking black and white "animated" movie.

As an experiment in marrying motion to a very painterly b&w two-tone storyboard, *Renaissance* is a breathtaking achievement. Sadly, as a full-length film with an involving plot and compelling characters, it fails completely.

Director Christian Volckman and producer Aton Soumache, working with a young technical wizard named Marc Miance (who was in turn working with scores of techies and animators on 300 workstations and 200 render servers provided by IBM), set about to push 3D animation forward. This they did. But it is clear after just a few minutes of *Renaissance* that the creative team behind the movie were so hung up on the visual wow factor, that they lost sight of the fact that they were trying to tell a story, too.

The screenplay by Mathieu Delaporte, Alexandre de la Patellière, Patrick Raynal, and Jean-Bernard Pouy, is an amalgam of every Hollywood noir movie French film students ever pored over, plus bits and pieces of *Metropolis*, *Blade Runner*, and countless other sf movies. Unfortunately, the end result has

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little cohesion, and even less character development.

To be fair, part of the problem is probably lost-in-translation syndrome. From what I can tell, the motion-captured actors ended up altered into graphic characters that were later voiced by yet another set of actors. On top of that, the secondary French voice actors have been replaced (in the U.S. release from Miramax) with mostly British actors like Daniel Craig, Romola Garai, Catherine McCormack, Ian Holm, and Jonathan Pryce.

Combine the issue of twice-removed acting with the nuance-killing, slightly abstracting (not to mention distracting) black and white animation technique used, and you begin to wonder whether a film like this is simply a no-win proposition. Perhaps it isn't simply the fault of an inept director and his writers — the people we are trained to blame — that this work leaves a final impression of being dull, flat, and never quite fleshed out. The flesh here is, after all, merely expanses of white with splashes of black to complete the picture.

Maybe the dazzling visual conceit that will inspire potential viewers to seek out this film is the very thing that dooms it to failure.

But no, that's letting the folks behind this movie off way too easy. There were solvable problems in *Renaissance* that were just not addressed by the filmmakers. And most of these issues stem from the trite storyline. The setup is hackneyed, but not completely without promise. A hard-bitten police detective named Karas is assigned the case of a missing young female scientist named Ilona Tasuiev. The company she works for, a monolithic power called Avalon, wants her back, pronto. It seems that her latest research might be on the verge of discovering the secret to eternal life.

The billboards for the company, touting its slogan of "Health, Beauty, Longevity" are repeatedly shown throughout the movie. And we quickly get a sense that the corporation is not above thuggery and even murder. But we never learn what the company is really about, or what it means to the lives of Parisians. Does Avalon have the populace in thrall? What does it sell them? Who are the Parisians of 2054 — specifically the ones, like the missing Ilona's older sister, Bislane, who people the sketchy plot and interact with Karas?

The movie makes no attempt to answer any of these questions. And I was surprised to read in the

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production notes for the film that in 2054 Paris "the borders have been sealed." If this fact is presented or discussed in any way in the film, then I guess I must have dozed off. Which is possible.

The film is a great opportunity completely squandered. *Renaissance* could have given us a real alternative and a refreshingly European view of the future. I would have welcomed that. Hollywood has a tendency to see the future (dystopic or not) as completely American. So much so that American sf disaster films have a penchant for blowing Paris to smithereens just for fun. (Shades of "the big one" Randy Newman advised us to drop on Paree more than thirty years back.)

Renaissance needed to go past its basic, banal mystery plot to explore the future society it supposedly has created for us. It should have also set aside its Gallic ennui long enough to enliven its characters with a bit of personality, and perhaps even a soupçon of wit. And, at the very least, it should have pondered the philosophical issues that would greet the scientific discovery of eternal life.

There is one character in the film who is actually the embodiment of this immortality research, but the film never even lets him speak to us...or to any of the characters, for that matter. A silent, wizened Yoda of a character wandering menacingly (pathetically?) through some of the final scenes, he is just another blown character opportunity in the sketchy plot of a very, very disappointing film.

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When John Morressy died last March, we were fortunate to have a few stories by him in inventory. "Fool," sadly, is the last of them (though we're still hoping some gems will turn up in his papers). It's a poignant and potent fantasy narrated by one of our favorite characters to pass through these pages recently.

By the way, readers should know we have a fine appreciation of John Morressy's work on our Website. Dave Truesdale has begun writing "Off on a Tangent" for us every month. Check it out on the "Departments" page; the December column takes a long look at the Morressy legacy.

Fool

By John Morressy

"NICCOLO COMES!"

At the cry, revelers crammed with food and sodden with wine cease their gobbling and swilling. They forget their eager lusts and roar with delight when I hobble in, darting in sudden lunges from side to side, wheeling round and round to afford every guest a look at my form and my features and my lopsided gait. Niccolo the fool is the climax of every feast.

Mixed with the shrieks of laughter are cries of horror and disgust. A sensitive few shrink from the sight of me and avert their eyes. I have caused women to faint; and some men, as well, to the delight of their companions.

Such is my welcome, and I glory in it. I was born to be a fool, and I am a master of my calling. And I am something more. Oh, yes, I am much more.

Had I been a shade less hideous, just a trifle less misshapen and ill-made, the midwife would have seen to it that I did not survive to shame my family. But I was plucked from the womb so magnificently ugly, so

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repellent to the eye, that she held me up by my crooked legs and cried, "Here's gold!"

That old woman was wise in the world's ways. She knew that there were many who would pay well for a fool who so looked his part. I needed no shaping hand to suit me for the motley, no fortunate accident or contorting sickness. I was born fully malformed.

I offended not merely the eye, but the ear as well. When I gave my first cry, the first of many, all those in hearing winced and shuddered, covered their ears, and declared that the devil himself had stuck his snout into our hovel to announce my birth. And perhaps he had. Perhaps he had.

My parents did not accept the midwife's estimate of my value. Whether they were too impatient, too needy, or simply eager to be free of the sight of me, I cannot say. Whatever the reason, they sold me while I was still a child, not for gold or even silver but for copper, and very little of that. I never saw my family again, to their great relief, I am sure. Certainly to mine.

My value has increased considerably since that day. I have refined my natural gifts and mastered a variety of useful skills. Now I am well rewarded for my work, and my work is varied. I am not always paid to amuse.

I remember little of my early years except the beatings. They were administered as guides to conduct and aids to my instruction, and served to me with greater regularity than my meals. My appearance and my clumsiness made me a handy object for the exercise of my first master's household, where I held a place below the lowliest servant. The beatings ended only when I was sold into the household of a bishop.

He was shocked to learn that I had never been baptized, and horrified when I told him the reason. My parents were simple pious folk who believed in a Heaven of eternal beauty and serenity. Such a place, they explained to my former master as they accepted his coins, could hold no room for such a thing as I, and so they never brought me to the baptismal font.

Or did they fear that I would taint the water?

I entered the bishop's palace on the feast of Saint Nicholas, and was christened with that good saint's name. The bishop was a godly man, severe toward himself but kindly to all others, a man too good for this rats'

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nest of a world men scrabble in. He delivered me from a cruel master and strove to teach me a different way of life. In the bishop's residence I was not an animal to be beaten into docile obedience, worked to death, and then tossed on a dunghill. To the bishop, my outward form did not matter. I was not a possession but the good man's brother in Christ, a child of God with a soul to be saved. I believe he actually saw a kind of beauty in me — a feat achieved by only one person since that time, and that person mad. I have never attempted it myself.

In the bishop's palace I learned that "God" was a word to be spoken in reverence, not in rage. I learned to read and write, and how to conduct myself in the presence of my betters. The palace was a far more desirable place to live than the barnyard, and I strove to be a model pupil. The good bishop also taught me the tenets of the faith and instructed me in morals. In those areas, though I was careful to give the required responses and display the expected piety in his presence, my progress was somewhat limited.

All in all, the bishop did his best to prepare me for the next world. Unknown to him, I was learning of the attractions of this one, and I was unwilling to depart from it without enjoying a goodly share of them.

In his palace, besides the scholars and the devout, the bishop had men and women with a wide range of worldly experience. He had in his employ some who had been thieves, prostitutes, and murderers. He was aware of their past transgressions, but believed them to be committed to a new life of repentance and atonement. In this he was deceived.

The bishop looked at men and women and saw them as they might be. I saw them as they were. The thieves, prostitutes, and murderers, too, became my teachers, and prepared me well for life this side of the grave. They taught me that we have always time to repent, should we be so inclined, but our time for pleasure and profit is short. We must make the most of our talents, and if opportunities do not come to us, we must create them.

It was from a chance remark of one of the thieves that I first learned of a chamber deep below the palace, a lead-lined vault locked and sealed and barricaded behind a wall of rubble. To it there existed only one key, and that key remained always in the bishop's possession. When I pressed the thief, he would say no more. I knew him to be a man of great daring,

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yet when I questioned him about the chamber he grew hesitant and evasive. He assured me that it was no more than an idle tale and urged me to dismiss it from my mind.

My curiosity was aroused. No one else in the household had ever made reference to this chamber. Only from an old servant, and at the cost of many tedious hours, did I draw out an account of the chamber and its contents.

Since long before the bishop's time, the vault had been a repository for books of an abominable nature, books so steeped in evil that they were beyond the power of man to destroy. To bury them in the ground would blight the earth; to drown them in the sea would poison the waters; the smoke of their burning would kill every living thing. All this the old servant told me, in fearful whispers.

I thought it wise to profess disbelief, and even to scoff at his tale. Inwardly I became obsessed by the thought of such power resting under my feet in this very palace. I had to possess it.

Thanks to the bishop's tutelage I had become as skilled a reader as any clerk. Now I had a purpose for that skill. Desire to find that chamber, to hold those forbidden books in my hands and glean their wisdom, overmastered me.

I revealed my intention to no one. I knew the value of stealth and patience, and my purpose demanded both in great measure. I knew the palace cellars well, and after much diligent searching I located the chamber. To the unsuspecting eye it was no more than a pile of rubble heaped against a wall, but when I dug, I unearthed a locked iron door, icy to my touch. The chamber was real.

Still I was forced to bide my time. I replaced the concealing rubble and waited. I observed the bishop closely, and eventually I learned where he concealed the key. One night when all the rest slept I entered the vault.

A dead and penetrating cold enveloped me the moment I entered, and a surge of fear nearly overcame me. But I could not turn back, not when those forbidden volumes lay within my reach. My hand trembled as I raised my lantern and scanned the shelves of that cold silent room. Those ancient volumes whispered a promise of power beyond imagining.

I saw books and scrolls of widely varied shapes and sizes. They numbered something more than a hundred. No two were alike. Some of

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the books were bound in plates of gold embedded with precious stones; others had simple leather covers free of all adornment. Some, I believe, were bound in human flesh. The scrolls too varied in size, from slim as a finger and scarcely longer to the length and thickness of a man's arm.

All these observations I made in great haste. I knew that I must act quickly. Time was limited and my courage was all but gone. I might never have the opportunity of a second visit, even if I dared it. The room grew ever colder, and my fear increased as the cold gripped my spirit. I had only the strength and will to snatch a few volumes and conceal them in some safe place where I might return to study them at leisure.

But many were too heavy to lift; others were sealed by intricate locks or were in languages I could not read. A few shrank from my touch like live things. Terror possessed me completely. I seized a single scroll and fled in panic from the chamber.

I have never again known such fear as I felt that night. In a cold sweat, trembling, my heart racing, I cowered in a far alcove until I had recovered. And then a change came over me. As if burned out of me by the cold, all fear vanished forever. Never again would I fear anything on this Earth. I still could sense the fear in others, but I did not share it.

Emboldened, I returned to reseal the room and replace the stones that concealed the entrance. When all signs of my visit had been removed, I returned to my chamber and collapsed in utter exhaustion.

When I read the scroll, I found that I had chosen well. It contained a malediction that I might invoke three times to destroy my enemies.

Had I remained in the bishop's palace I might have revisited that chamber and learned much more, but like so many good men, the bishop died in the prime of life, his health broken by years of sacrifice and self-denial. The new bishop was a very different man. He found many of the household unsuitable, myself among them. When I left the palace, the scroll remained behind. Its contents had long been fixed in my memory. Whether it has yet begun to corrupt the soil around its place of concealment, I neither know nor care. I had learned enough.

The old bishop admonished me repeatedly to speak only good of the dead. He also urged me to speak the truth. I am therefore in a dilemma about how to refer to my next master, a wealthy merchant. His home was

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a treasure vault and a prison. He was false to God and men, cruel without cause, and now he is dead.

His death was mysterious and to those who were present, terrifying. It was the first test of my knowledge from the vault; a squandering of power, perhaps — the malediction could now be used but twice more — but a reassuring proof of its efficacy.

It was the master's habit to lock the door of his sleeping chamber against thieves and enemies. His bodyguard, a giant mute named Orso who could kill a man with one blow, always slept before the door. On the night of the master's death, all in the household were awakened by his shrill cries and the sound of a violent struggle. Another voice could be heard within the room, and while none could agree on the language it spoke, all agreed on the terror it inspired in them. The door could not be opened, and resisted all Orso's efforts to break it down. Yet at dawn it swung wide, and those who entered saw a sight that sickened them. The master's blood spattered walls and floor, and his body lay torn and rent as if by the claws of a great beast. Little remained of his face but the eyes, which were fixed in a look of horror.

I was pleased at these results. Now I knew the power of the malediction. Two uses remained, and I resolved to use them prudently.

I recount what I was told, for I was not present at the master's death. I had planned carefully. It occurred on a night when two other servants and I were away on an errand of some importance. My role in his death was never suspected.

The master's sudden passing caused great disorder in the household. Another servant and I took the opportunity to fill our pockets and set out on our own.

MY EDUCATION now took a different turn. I already knew how difficult the world is for one whom others consider fair game for their sport. I had acquired a powerful defense, but could not employ it lightly. Now I learned simpler ways that a man, though misshapen and lacking a protector, can be a match for the strong.

My companion Giulio and I lived for a time on our late master's ducats and when they were gone, by theft. We might have continued in

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this manner until we were hanged, but the unfortunate lad had a hot temper. He died in a foolish brawl. With him fell two others, one of them a member of a troupe of traveling players. I saw an opportunity. The very next day I joined their company.

The bishop had instructed me in rhetoric and logic, and trained my memory. I was skilled in dispute and ready in repartee. From fellow servants I had learned to juggle and become something of an acrobat. My talents improved with practice, and with my addition, the company prospered. My lot improved. I had no need to call upon my darker power. I knew how to use a weapon and had companions who would come to my aid. I had money in my purse, and could purchase meat and drink and the companionship of women who treated me, for a time, as a man like all others. But the world held more, and I meant to have my full share.

One night, at a taverna that welcomed players and charged them dearly for the privilege of drinking poor wine and eating worse food, a man in elegant but somber dress entered into conversation with me. I was wary, as one must always be of strangers, especially those who are clearly superior to the surrounding company; but he was well groomed and well spoken, and spent freely. I anticipated some profit in listening to him. We discussed commonplaces for a time, and since I am aware that people do not speak to me out of kindliness or fellow-feeling, I grew impatient for him to broach the subject that had brought him into my company. At last he asked, "Do you like the life of a traveler?"

"I have little choice," I replied.

"Life in a great household is more comfortable and rewarding."

"I am certain it is. And it is better to be rich than poor." He smiled and nodded, and when he did not speak, I went on, "What great household would welcome me, sir? Good men cross themselves at sight of me, and women miscarry. If I tend animals, they pine away. Put me in the kitchen and the milk will sour. Stand me by the fire and it burns blue and stinks of sulphur. I have heard all the jokes others make at my expense, sir, and require none from you."

His placid expression did not change. He lifted his palms in a pacifying gesture. "I do not joke. I offer a possibility."

"Offer it, then."

"You might be a powerful man's jester. You have the necessary skills."

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"You are polite, sir. Whatever I do, I am already a jest to all who see me."

"Commoners and rabble," he said. "They toss you a few pennies and then curse themselves for spendthrifts. Your skills are wasted on them. A great man's fool eats good food and sleeps in a soft bed. He wears fine clothes. He has a protector. A good master can reward you generously if you please him."

"And where am I to find this benefactor?"

He smiled a tight, satisfied smile, like one who holds the answer to a child's riddle. "In the palazzo that lies not half an hour's walk from this inn, on the grand piazza of the city. My master's fool was killed in a quarrel among the servants, and he seeks a man to replace him."

"I have no wish to be stabbed by some angry kitchen boy," I said.

"The Count Ridolfo is a just man. He made an example of the murderer. Such an incident will not recur," said the stranger.

"And how will my lot improve?"

"Pour out that ditch water and try this," he said, pushing before me a leather bottle from which he had been drinking.

I emptied my cup on the floor and refilled it with wine from his bottle. It was better than the best from the bishop's cellar.

"The Count's servants drink it at table. Their food is as good as their drink," he said.

"And they sleep in soft beds under a dry roof. Tell me, do they dress in silks and furs?"

He looked my shabby false finery up and down and said, "Their livery is somewhat more pleasing to the eye than yours, and much cleaner."

"Why do you offer me such good things, sir? Are you my guardian angel? My patron saint?"

"Not an angel, still less a saint," he said, still smiling. "I am the *fattore* of Count Ridolfo. My duty is to keep the household running smoothly. We have lost a fool. I saw you perform and decided you would be an admirable replacement. Come to the palazzo in the morning, and say you come at Benedetto's invitation."

I had learned long ago not to trust anyone. But that night I gave his offer much thought. My occult learning was useful, but dangerous to use; the safety of a great household was desirable. I was weary of traveling, of

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the bickering of these players, of coaxing coins from peasants who were nearly as ugly as I and as dull as oxen. The life of a powerful man's fool could be no worse. And thus I came to a new calling.

As I walked to the palazzo of Count Ridolfo the following morning I heard no more than the usual taunts of street loafers and young idlers. The sight of my weapons discouraged anything more than catcalls from a safe distance. Benedetto's name admitted me to the palazzo, and he saw to it that I was quickly installed in the household. By nightfall I had met most of the servants.

Only one incident marred my arrival, and I quickly turned it to my advantage. When I was introduced in the servants' quarters a loud red-faced fellow whom I could see at once was the sort who was always eager to put a newcomer in his place looked up from where he sat and said to his fellows, "Here's a beauty. What shall we call him? I say we christen him 'Malfatto.' What say you?" When no one objected, he raised his cup and said, "Come, Malfatto, and receive your new name."

I laughed along with the others as I went to his side, my hand extended in friendship. The laughter stopped when I locked my fingers in his and bent back his hand until he slid from his seat to the floor, whimpering for release.

I let him plead for a time, and then I leant closer and said softly in his ear, "My name is Niccolo. Tell that to everyone. Say 'Malfatto' in my hearing again and it will be your dying word."

I gave him a hard kick in the ribs to impress my words on his memory and then helped him to his feet. He welcomed me by name.

The incident had the desired effect on my fellow servants. Unfortunately for my antagonist, he chose to discomfort me in other ways. I might have employed the power of the scroll to dispose of him, but it was not necessary. He died in a fall from the bell tower.

Before my first week's end I was measured for my livery. Soon I was wearing the finest outfit I had ever possessed, of excellent materials perfectly fitted to the contours of my body. For a full month I busied myself learning the ways of the household before I was admitted to Count Ridolfo's presence.

There had been much coming and going in the palazzo during those

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days, solemn faces and wary glances among the family, and among the servants much speculation about the cause of this tension. Rumors abounded, but no knowledge. As a newcomer, I was the least informed of all; and so I waited, made myself agreeable to everyone I met — it is a skill one acquires — and before many days learned the cause of all the stir.

Word had come from a trustworthy informant that a rival family planned an attack on the Count and his sons. I could learn no more, and did not seek to do so. It is best for the fool to play the fool until the proper moment.

I was summoned to Count Ridolfo's private chamber late one night. He was with four men, two of whom I recognized as his sons. This was my first sight of my master, and I found him formidable.

Count Ridolfo had a large leonine head with a great crown of white hair. His face was square, his mouth narrow, and his jaw prominent. His nose had been broken and inexpertly set, and a thin scar ran down his right cheek. That face, cold and hard as stone, was a silent warning. His displeasure was plain to see. This was a man whom ordinary men might fear, with good reason. He would be very useful to me.

He bade me approach, stopping me a few paces away with a gesture. Count Ridolfo permitted no one to get close to him — a precaution he had adopted after a cousin gave him the scar on his cheek. He looked me over, hands on his hips. He circled me slowly, like a man studying a work of art.

"So you are my fool," he said.

"No, my lord. I am your good angel," I said, bowing and making my most hideous face.

He did not smile. "A fool and a liar. You will thrive in this city."

One of the others, who stood apart, kept his gaze on the floor. No man spoke or looked at his companions. I could taste the fear in the room, and it made clear to me what I must do.

"Advise me, fool," said the Count. "Your advice can be no worse than some I receive. I have enemies who plot to murder me and my sons. I know the identities of all those involved in the plot. What shall I do?"

"Act like a man. Kill them all, and have it whispered everywhere that your hand has done the deed," I said.

"Have I another choice?"

"Yes. Do nothing, and there will be two fools in this household."

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He did not respond for a time. When he spoke at last, there was no anger in his voice. "You speak boldly."

I spread my arms to display my livery. "I belong to a great house, not a nunnery. Why should I speak softly, and counsel meekness?" His sons exchanged an approving glance. One of the other men nodded. The fourth gave me a quick hateful glance.

"Some members of a great house would," the Count said. "Tell me, is a man a fool to take a fool's advice?"

"Sometimes a man is a fool to heed a wise man and sometimes he is wise to listen to a fool. It depends on the man, the fool, and the advice, my lord."

He looked at me for a time in silence, then said, "Entertain us tomorrow at dinner. And now go, before you destroy our appetites." He dismissed me with a flick of his hand. I backed from his presence, bowing with exaggerated deference to all. I had been summoned to humiliate someone, that much was clear, and now had an enemy in the house. I hoped I had made the right one. The right enemy can be as useful as a dozen good friends. He keeps a man alert.

As it happens, my enemy did me neither harm nor good. He was seen no more in the palazzo after that night.

Count Ridolfo looked upon life as a serious matter. Even my most grotesque antics could not bring a smile to that cold face. He gave a nod of approval at my juggling and my tumbling, but encouraged no banter. For all he cared, I might as well have been mute. His sons were easier to amuse. Andrea, the eldest, emulated his father. He seldom smiled, but he often murmured, "Well said, well said," at a satiric observation. The younger ones laughed at my acrobatics and once the Count had left us, reveled in my bawdry.

There was no bawdry in the Count's presence, nor when the ladies were within hearing. The Contessa spent her waking moments in prayer. I believe she prayed even in her few hours of sleep.

Maddalena, the youngest child and only daughter, was the darling of the family. In her, the distinctive family features were gentled and softened. She smiled often, and though fully fifteen years old, was still capable of childlike enthusiasms and affections. Her cats, her dog, her monkey, the birds who came to her window and fed from her hand, all

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enjoyed her generous love. From the very first time she saw me she was capable of looking at me without shrinking. Unlike the rest of her family, she was fond of my songs and tales of love and chivalry, sometimes stopping outside the kitchen to listen as attentively as any ignorant kitchen wench whenever I chose to entertain the servants of an evening.

She attended Mass every morning, accompanied by a few servants and one or more of her brothers. I was sometimes made part of the company. While the brothers ogled the ladies and exchanged with their friends accounts of their previous night's escapades, Maddalena knelt with bowed head, praying for us all. Once we left those cool echoing spaces and the church doors closed behind us, she became a carefree young lady once again. She was an angel, but human, fully human.

Her marriage to the son of a leading family was to take place in the spring. Like all marriages of wealth and power in this city, it was first and foremost an alliance, arranged with the scrupulous care one might give to a treaty between great powers. In truth, that is what it was. The family of her betrothed, landowners and bankers, were wealthier than that of Count Ridolfo, but did not enjoy his stature and his influence. My master had three times been a Lord Prior; his brother had been elected once to the Signory and served as one of the Twelve.

Jacopo, the betrothed, was a splendid-looking animal, tall and well-formed, with regular features and deep brown hair that curled at his shoulders. His voice was pleasing to the ear. He smiled easily and often, and his wit coaxed smiles and laughter from every company. I amused myself with the conceit that the Creator, having introduced me to the household, now wished to restore balance in our little universe by adding one who was my opposite — at least in appearance.

Jacopo was in truth a beautiful beast, and Maddalena was enchanted by him. She cooed and moaned and sighed over his smile, his voice, his hair, and his eyes, repeated his most banal pleasantries as if they were Holy Writ, and recited over and over the clumsy verses he sent her until the entire household knew them by heart. She wearied everyone with her incessant praise of her Jacopo.

I dutifully echoed her, but set my bounds: I would not praise his eyes. They held a warning of danger to come. Deep within them was the glint of hunger. This youth whose person might have obtained for him whatever

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he desired, or, that failing, whose wealth enabled him to purchase what he could not seize outright, had the avaricious gaze of the peasant who wants a thing because it exists, because another enjoys it, simply because it is not his.

I would have given Jacopo a family crest more fitting than the one he boasted. I would have a gaping mouth and two outstretched hands gules on a field sable, the motto the single word *desidero* thrice repeated. Jacopo had the face of an angel and the soul of a greedy ape.

I had no part in the wedding celebrations. I was lent for a time to Count Sigonio, a friend of my master's who had expressed admiration for my talents and was at the time in want of a fool. I believe, too, that both families feared that the sight of my face at the wedding would assure that the first child of this union would be a monster.

I had once seen the fool of Count Sigonio, a zany dwarf. He was known as Fratellino for his custom of donning a miniature friar's habit and delivering blasphemous sermons to entertain the company. He was a gifted mimic who could perfectly ape the manners and speech of anyone he met, to the delight of the onlookers. Alas for Fratellino, not everyone appreciated his gifts. His body was found one morning on the riverbank. It was said that he fell from a bridge and drowned during a drunken revel. Believe what you will.

In my stay with Count Sigonio I confined my mockery to my own appearance, and was much praised and generously rewarded. I also observed and listened, and returned to my master with useful information.

Count Ridolfo's enemies, the Forzos, had been guests at Maddalena's wedding and had presented the couple with a richly ornamented gold and silver bowl, the work of one of the city's leading artisans. They had not abandoned their plan to murder the Count and his sons, merely postponed it to a more suitable moment, and in the meantime they pretended friendship. My master responded in kind, playing the gracious host, the grateful parent, the friend; in their eyes, the dupe. He bided his time. He had his own plans, and in these I was able to serve him well.

It was clear that the Forzos must die if my master and his family were to live safely and prosper in the city. But when they were gone, other enemies equally powerful would remain. The solution to this problem

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was obvious to me, though it did not occur to others; if it did, they were hesitant to offer it. I was fortunate to possess a resource that others did not enjoy, and this was the proper time to make use of it.

I now had freer access to Count Ridolfo, and when the moment seemed propitious, I suggested to him that it would be well to dispose of as many of his enemies as possible at a single stroke. His stony face came very close to a smile at my suggestion.

"What does my fool advise?" he asked.

I looked at the others in the room and said, "First of all, secrecy."

He dismissed all but Andrea, and they left the chamber without a word. "You trust no one," he said when the door closed behind the last man.

"Caution is the strongest armor," I said.

"Your advice."

"A great banquet, the Forzos as honored guests. It must be held the Monday after next."

"And why then?" he asked.

"Because two days following, they dine with their friends and allies the Dati."

The Count and his son exchanged a quick glance. This alliance was unknown to them.

I quickly went on, "The Forzos will die before they reach home that night, and all will say — with a little encouragement — that they have been poisoned by the treachery of the Dati. The Dati will be punished for their crime. You will see to that. And you will be rid of both enemies."

"Can you do this?" the Count asked.

"They will be poisoned on the night they dine with us, as will you and I and all who sit at table. But I will administer the antidote to those you select."

"So the Forzos die, and the Dati are accused. An admirable plan." He reflected for a time, then said, "You would have me trust you with my life."

"As I trust you with mine. I will take the poison too, my lord. A double dose, for your double assurance."

Again he reflected, but this time only briefly. Then with a sharp bark of mirthless laughter he said, "It will be so."

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And so it was — though not precisely as I had described it. The feast was splendid, the celebration long and hearty. Every member of both our houses attended. I kept the company in an uproar with my quips and antics, and all were merry.

When every belly had been filled to repletion and the last kisses and embraces and vows of everlasting friendship had been sworn, the doors were closed and locked behind our departing guests and every shutter firmly secured. All merriment ceased and we hastened to purge ourselves.

For all in our household, purging was unnecessary; no one had been poisoned. I intended to dispose of our enemies by means of my darker knowledge. But it was essential for my safety that all believed themselves poisoned. I had no wish to die at the stake. The Count would protect an assassin, but even he would not defend a practitioner of the black arts.

I conscientiously made certain that all those who had sat at table gagged and retched and heaved their sides to disgorge the sumptuous meats, the excellent wines, the fruits and the sweets and the sauces. When we all had emptied our bellies, I personally administered an unpleasant-tasting mixture which I presented as the antidote, and watched them gulp it down eagerly. Their grimaces made a most amusing spectacle, well worth the brief discomfort I was forced to undergo with them.

The servants had been kept in ignorance of the plot. As always, they snatched what choice bits they could from the platters and ate heartily of what remained, and so I made sure to season their next day's meals with my antidote, and to do so in Andrea's presence.

Next day the city talked of nothing but the friendship between our house and the Forzos. Two days after, when that family were found dead and bloated in their palazzo, swollen tongues bulging from their mouths, all were busy babbling of the treachery of the Dati.

My master led the cry for justice and saw that it was administered swiftly and sternly. He commissioned a magnificent memorial to his murdered friends. All in all, the Forzo affair was a great victory for him. For me, the second use of my power was a triumph. I, the Count's fool, became his trusted advisor.

For two years and more, I was called upon to do little more than entertain his guests and from time to time, visit a friend's house. I did my

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work to the satisfaction of all, and needed no exercise of my special knowledge, which pleased me. Only one malediction remained, and I had no wish to use it prematurely.

Life was easy and pleasant. So easy was it that I began to grow bored.

On the occasion of their third anniversary, Maddalena and her husband came to the Count's palazzo for a prolonged visit, bringing their little son, Leonardo. He was a healthy, vigorous child with his father's features and his mother's nature. He attached himself to me at once, to his mother's delight and his father's disgust, but even Jacopo smiled at our joint antics — more, I suspect, to display his even white teeth than to express his pleasure.

Maddalena was already great with their second child, and Jacopo played the role of solicitous husband on every occasion, keeping always by her side, whispering to her, taking her arm, gazing on her fondly in company. They seemed a happy couple.

She came to my chamber in the dead of night. I awoke at the sound of someone at the door, but it was so faint a sound that at first I thought it a cat or a rat brushing against the door as it passed. Then came a soft rhythmic tapping.

I armed myself and moved silently to the door. There I waited. Again came the soft tapping and then my name, in a whisper.

I knew the voice at once. For an instant I was too astonished to respond. She had come to me in the night, to my chamber.

Then she whispered my name again, "Niccolo, Niccolo, help me."

I opened the door and she slipped in as if in flight. She fell to her knees, sobbing, and I stooped to lift her. She threw her arms around me and pulled herself close. I drew away and quickly shut the door. If she were found here it could mean death for us both.

"My lady, is there some danger?"

"He is a beast. A monster from Hell!"

"Do you speak of your husband?"

She clutched my hand in both of hers. "Jacopo is a monster. I have married a monster."

"The fairest man in the city, and you call him a monster? I am the monster, my lady."

She pressed her head against my chest. Sobbing, she said, "No,

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Niccolo, you are good. Within, you are good, and kind. I have always seen that. His ugliness is deep inside him, hidden from all eyes. Only those closest to him know of it, and they can tell no one, for no one will believe them. Even my own family see only the surface."

"What would you have me do?"

"Help me. Please, Niccolo, help me! He will never change. He has beaten me, and I fear what he will do to our son."

Her bare white arms and her face bore no signs of abuse. "My lady, I see no marks."

"When we learned that I am again with child, he stopped striking me, but he is as cruel as ever in other ways, every way he can be. Help me, Niccolo, I beg you."

"Your father, your brothers — will they do nothing?"

"My father will not listen, and I cannot tell my brothers the things he has done to me. I am too ashamed. My mother would only tell me to be a better wife. You are the only one I can trust. You must help me. I will do anything you ask, only help me."

I was astonished. I knew that not even sorcery could make a woman look on me with favor, but I truly believe I might have had Maddalena then and there, in my own bed.

I did not yield to the temptation. Even the pleasure of cuckolding the strutting Jacopo was not worth this risk. And I trusted no one with my life, not even the gentle Maddalena.

"Return to your chamber," I said. "I will help you. You must give me time."

She embraced me. "You are an angel. My faithful angel."

I lay awake for much of the night, pondering her words. My thoughts were not angelic. *You are good and kind, Niccolo. Within, you are good.* Though the matter was grave, her innocence was almost comical.

Ridding her of Jacopo posed no problem. I had often entertained myself with fantasies of his murder. I knew I must move with care. Maddalena could be given no reason to suspect my hand in his death. I believe that even had she proof, she would hesitate to betray me, instead condemning herself for inciting me to the deed. Such was her nature. But that innocent and pious nature might undo us both. In time, she might come to regret her rash words. She might even forgive Jacopo, and recant her plea to me. And what if she should confess the revelation to him?

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The danger was equally great whether I chose to act on my promise or to ignore it, so my decision was easily made.

Jacopo would die, soon, and by my own hand. My remaining malediction would not be thrown away on a jackal. The deed would give me as much pleasure as it gave relief to Maddalena.

Their child was a second son as beautiful as the first. So everyone agreed, and I must accept their assessment. I am a poor judge of beauty. I saw Maddalena one day about a month after the birth, and she had the expression of a hunted creature. Others seemed not to notice.

Jacopo died during carnival. His body was found in a narrow passage near the brothels. He was apparently the victim of a quarrel or a robbery. His face had been disfigured with particular savagery.

I had planned it carefully. On the evening of his death I was entertaining the Count's guests at a banquet that lasted well into the morning hours. I had moved freely among the guests, joking and laughing, making sure that every guest was befuddled by wine and unaware of the hour, but conscious of my constant presence. Jacopo occupied me for no more than a quarter of an hour, and no one was aware of my brief absence. All who had been present agreed that I was particularly amusing that evening.

Our city is not shocked easily, but the violence of this murder was the topic of every conversation for some time. My master saw to that. Who could have perpetrated so vicious an attack on handsome, jovial Jacopo, adoring young husband and loving father of two fine sons, was the subject for much speculation and some fear. The severest and most searching inquiries were demanded by Count Ridolfo, who vowed to seek out the murderer of his beloved son-in-law. He did not succeed.

My master judged it wise, for her safety and the care of her sons, that Maddalena return to the family's palazzo. Jacopo's family dared make no objection, and soon she was among us once again. I became the guardian and playmate of Leonardo and his younger brother, and saw Maddalena daily, but our nighttime conversation was never mentioned.

My master summoned me one day to discuss a dinner to be given in honor of certain city officials. When we had settled the details, he said, "Are you content in my service?"

Such a question came unexpectedly from Count Ridolfo, to whom the contentment of others was a matter of small importance. But I did not hesitate. "I am very content. I hope I have been useful."

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"I suspect you have been useful in some ways I do not know, and do not care to know." He paused, and I did not respond. Before I could speak he went on, "You never ask for money. Have you no needs, or do you steal all you require?"

"I serve a great family. I am well fed, comfortably housed, and richly dressed. I live in a grand palazzo and have servants of my own. Everyone in the household is generous to me, as are your friends in the homes I visit. What more could I want?"

"Such contentment is a blessing. But a loyal servant deserves a reward." He pushed a purse across the table. "Be ready when I require future service."

In the years that followed I have had no need of my occult knowledge. On every occasion I proved myself worthy of Count Ridolfo's trust and generosity by my wits alone. The time came when he had great need of a faithful servant, for a series of heavy blows fell upon him. His youngest son, Paolo, was killed in a street brawl. Paolo was an idle, foolish fellow, too quick to perceive an insult where none existed, and he paid dearly for his pride. Within the year the two older sons were swept to their deaths in an avalanche while on a mission to France. All his sons had died childless.

Of all his children, only Maddalena remained, and she was no longer the carefree child who had left to marry Jacopo. Now a woman of twenty-two at the height of her beauty, she had not yet remarried. The death of that posturer haunted her. She blotted his cruelty from her memory and persuaded herself that they had had a loving marriage. Her smiles were seen no more. She became as pious as her mother, surpassing even that gaunt and spectral old woman in her devotions.

More and more, Count Ridolfo placed his hope in his grandsons and his trust in me, I became their accepted guardian and teacher.

I should have been wary when Maddalena began to seek my advice about "our" children. When one day she addressed me in private as "Jacopo," I let it pass as a lapse of thought or a slip of the tongue. But when she came to my room that night, slipped into my bed, called me husband and coaxed me to her side with fond names, I lost my wits.

I was powerless. My strength, my cunning, my dark power were all useless to me. I did not know what to do. My life was in her hands. If I turned her away, what wild accusations might she make? She need do no more than reveal our conversation on that night so many years ago to

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destroy me. And yet if I played the role she had cast for me, the consequences could only lead to disaster.

But she was beautiful, so beautiful. She gave herself to me eagerly. And the flesh — even a fool's misshapen flesh — is weak.

After that night she came to me regularly, and in our moments together she always called me her Jacopo, praised my beauty and spoke lovingly of our years of married happiness. Yet before others she behaved toward me as to a servant.

She knew the truth but could not admit her guilt to herself. Her mind had divided itself in two. One part denied Jacopo's death, telling her that her husband lived, that she was a loyal and loving wife, innocent of all wrongdoing. But the other part knew all that had happened as clearly as if she had witnessed the deed.

On the night when she whispered to me that she was to have our third child, I knew that the masquerade could not continue. I had known the love of a woman, a mad, beautiful woman who looked at me and saw the ghost of the handsome husband whose death she had bought about. Now it must end.

I USED A SIMPLE poison in a goblet of wine. Maddalena was discovered kneeling at her prie-dieu, her face buried in her hands, as one in meditation or prayer. She showed no sign of suffering. Her eyes were closed as if in peaceful sleep, and her face bore a faint smile. She had always been too good, too innocent for this world. I felt a certain satisfaction to know that I had ushered her gently into a world where she would be welcomed. I had sent others to a worse place.

This last blow fell heavily on Count Ridolfo and left its mark. The deaths of his sons had hardened him; Maddalena's death seemed to melt away his manhood in a day. His audacity in conception, his decisiveness in action, his pride in everything left him, and he became suddenly an old man, a fearful prisoner in a world of prowling dangers. But he is useful to me still, and I serve him well.

Since the Contessa's death, not a year following her daughter's, I have been his sole companion and adviser, always at his side, and with us the two grandsons, the only heirs to this great house. Leonardo thrives, and his grandfather dotes on him. He resembles his father in many ways. Giorgio

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is a frail and sickly boy, but clever, very clever. He will survive. I still play the fool for them, and from time to time I am called upon to amuse my master and his guests, for his banquets are as lavish as ever, though less frequent and more selective. Even now, broken and brought low within, he is too important a man to withdraw from the world completely and give himself up to solitude and sorrow, still too proud to show feeling.

He has his wealth and power and influence, and he has his grandsons, and his faithful Niccolo to watch over them when he is no longer able. They are safely in my hands.

As for me, my needs are few, and the Count is generous, most generous. He serves me well.

Even now, he is a strong protector. I fear no enemy. I know that no man in this world is ever truly safe from betrayal, injury, and the assassin's hand; but I know too that the man who harms me will be punished in ways beyond imagining. I husband my final malediction carefully.

For the present, I am content. As for the future, who can say what may be?

Only a fool would dare.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

WHAT DO YOU THINK will happen to Guth Bandar? We're not giving away any hints, but come back next month and we'll give you the whole shebang. We think you're going to like it.

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CURIOSITIES

THE OCTAVE OF CLAUDIUS, BY BARRY PAIN (1897)

CLAUDIUS Sandell, a young unpublished novelist, is rendered penniless and homeless when his father disowns him. The mysterious surgeon Dr. Lamb gives Claudius £8,000 to spend as he sees fit, and an octave (eight days) in which to spend it...on condition that Claudius must afterward submit to an experiment that will "benefit mankind."

In the next eight days, Claudius reconciles with his father, gets his novel accepted, meets a beautiful young woman who reciprocates his passion, and becomes wealthy in the stock market. Naturally, being a man of honor, Claudius reports to Dr. Lamb's laboratory on schedule. Fortunately, the crazed scientist's long-abused wife murders Dr. Lamb just as Claudius is about to be surgically regressed to simian form.

Decades after its publication, *The Octave of Claudius* was praised by George Orwell as "a brilliant exercise in the macabre." The novel was filmed (with major changes) in 1922 as *A Blind Bargain*, notable for a hand-colored sequence when the hero attends a charity ball, and for Lon Chaney's presence in a dual role: in a somewhat mannered performance as the mad scientist, and as the aftermath of one of Dr. Lamb's previous experiments (a character not in the original novel).

Eric Odell (1867-1928) was an English journalist who wrote novels and parodies under the name Barry Pain. His 1911 novel *An Exchange of Souls* describes an attempt by a man and woman to trade bodies, but remains ambiguous as to whether or not the exchange really occurs.

— F. Gwynplaine MacIntyre

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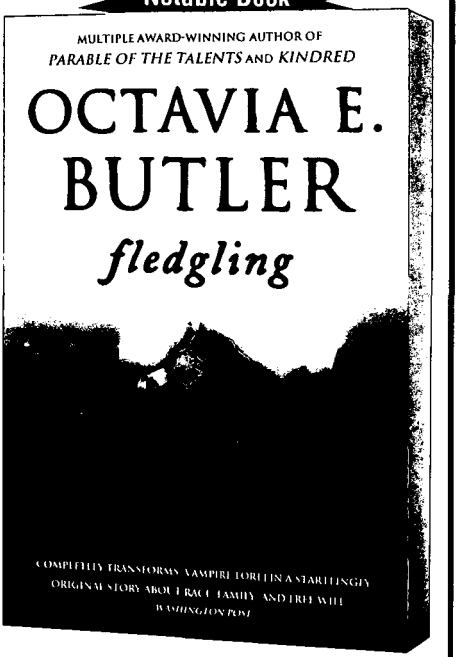
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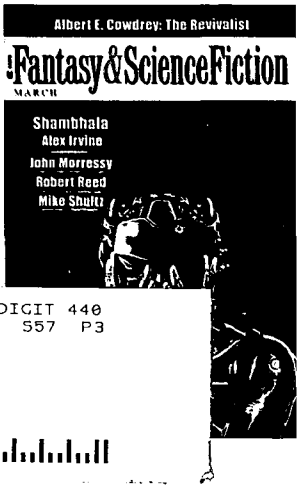

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